

# The Changing Image of America in Modern Korean Fiction

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## 1.

What images does "America" evoke in the consciousnesses of Koreans today? How do they perceive her? Among the various problems Korean society is grappling with, this is surely one of the topics which may elicit the most acute reactions. To America, the ally which assisted Korea most closely after her liberation from Japanese imperialism, feelings of gratitude are duly held, but if we investigate Korean-American relations at their most fundamental level, that is, in such dimensions as problems between the two countries and the two peoples, immanent conditions are revealed which cannot be explained by this singular concept.

Looking back over the major political events interspersed throughout modern Korean history, the nature of Korean-American relations has been far from that desired by the Korean people. The most basic attributes of these relations have been controlled by American policy toward Korea, these policies being connected to America's global strategy of maintaining the balance of power between East and West, and changes in America's political understanding of the Korean peninsula. Considering only the most visible cases such as the American occupation following the August Liberation, participation in the Korean War, American intervention following the turbulence of the April Revolution, and Korean participation in the Vietnam Conflict, we may ascertain that these were based on America's choice,

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rather than on the wishes of Korea.

Before our “closer” view of the substantial meaning behind Korean-American relations, I feel it necessary to pause to remind the listener of the affection that is undeniably felt by Koreans for America and her people. Globally the strongest, wealthiest and most democratic of nations, “America” carries the single largest influence upon the minds of Koreans in the realms of politics, military, economics, society and culture. This influence manifests itself positively at times, and negatively at others. An often blind emphasis of the image of America as “ally” has led to an unconditional feeling of aspiration for America and things American: a feeling which has come to draw, rightly enough, sharper and more magnified criticism. While the impressions of the Korean people toward America are largely those of friend and ally, we may not conscientiously ignore those “other” feelings present in the Korean: those characterized by negativity, or even repulsion. This paper intends to discuss the image of America or Americans revealed through modern Korean fiction, focusing on the historical aspect of Korean-American relations. However, a cautionary note is needed before the main discussion. Although the vision of Americans and America portrayed in modern Korean novels may consist largely of impressionistic anecdotes that comprise only an incidental part of the main themes of the fictions, they nonetheless represent a factor in depicting the lives of modern Koreans. The reactions to these individual impressions result from personal feelings. However, one can affirm to some extent how Korean novelists view America and Americans through the individual cases emerging from their fiction.

## 2.

Korean liberation from Japanese colonial ruling in 1945 became a juncture in modern Korean history. What is meant by this ‘juncture’ should not be restricted to a sense of liberation from Japanese subjugation but should include the notion that, along with the liberalization, Koreans would face another historical paradox in the form of a division of the country.

America emerges as the new powerhouse in Korea at this juncture. The American military that defeated the imperialistic forces of Japan now flexes its muscle, capable of handily altering the fate of Korea, even from the moment of the landing at Inch'on in September, 1945. General Hodge, then the commander of the Eighth Military Division, which occupied the Korean peninsula, wrote in his declaration to the Korean people that the restructuring of the national framework could not be

achieved overnight, and therefore it should be emphasized that the maintenance of peace would be accompanied by loss of lives and a certain amount of unavoidable chaos. In addition, he defined the objective of the landing as the preservation of order in the local area. This suggests that from the beginning, the American military was conceived of as an occupying force rather than as the liberator of Korea that Koreans had hoped it would be. This interpretation proved to be legitimate as the American military took over the policing duties previously undertaken by the Japanese and established a new governing structure of its own, raising the Stars and Stripes all over Korea.

To Koreans who hailed the advent of liberation with elation, America became the new ruler replacing Japan, and the direction of the government was determined according to the American policies affecting occupied territories. In the end, Koreans faced with the task of building a new nation could not exercise their will effectively due to those circumstances and were forced to accept decisions made unilaterally by America.

Yŏm Sang-sŏp, in his short story titled *Thirty-Eighth Parallel* (1948), renders these historical situations using the story of a Korean returning to his liberated mother country. The scene where the protagonist, returning to Seoul from Manchuria, is muttering "the first person I see is an American soldier!" upon crossing the Thirty-Eighth Parallel, allows us to re-experience the irony Koreans felt in the wake of the liberation and the subsequent division of their mother country.

The enormous disturbance within the Korean psyche caused by the American military occupation is expressed in several different ways, such as the critical view that the fictions adopt toward the new self-appointed overlord, the American military, and toward those opportunistic Koreans who wielded a delegated power by groveling before it. One can readily admit that the novels expressing these images do not directly designate the American military as the object of criticism, but they do indeed convey a sense of betrayal by the American military, who rule without seeking to understand Korean culture or sensibilities, as evidenced by its employment of such opportunistic sycophants.

The short story *Mr. Bang* by Ch'ae Man-shik (1946) satirized this situation by suggesting that the so-called Korean liberation did not really free the Korean people, but only opened the door for hoodlum opportunists presided over by Americans. Mr. Bang, who used to be a cobbler during the Japanese colonial period, returns to Korea from Shanghai after the liberation. He then rapidly rises to an influential position because of his somewhat fragmented knowledge of English, picked up during his long years of wandering. All the people who need to ask for

the American military's favors come to Mr. Bang, and Mr. Bang then curries favors from an American officer. The plot climaxes when Mr. Bang nonchalantly takes on the request of a neighbor, who is infamous for being a Japanophile, to punish the people who assaulted his home, using the American military's authority. Although he does not give much thought to aiding in this horrendous act, he is in a way punished for his callousness when he is dismissed from his interpreter position by accidentally spitting gargling water on the American officer's face. Of course, the acts of Mr. Bang and the American officer who received a shower of gargling water represent the object of ridicule in the story.

Whereas the element of satire in the short story *Mr. Bang* reveals the problems of social ethics, the short story *Cookie Case* by Yöm Sang-söp (1948), shows the hardening of the attitude of the Korean intelligentsia regarding the American military into a kind of paranoia. It tells the story of a family who rents a room in a house owned by a girl. She is able to afford the huge house and extravagant western furniture because she has befriended an American soldier who hands out all these things to her. The girl's boasting of all the objects that she received from the soldier irks the family. Because the girl cannot understand English well, she asks the family to translate a letter sent by the American soldier. A daughter who studies English at school does the girl's bidding and receives a box of 'western' cookies in return. The head of the family, who was irritated from the start about the fact that the girl was chummy with an American soldier, fumes over the daughter, saying "do you have to stoop so low as to accept those petty candies for translating that dirty letter?" The behavior of the American soldier and the existence of the girl are both recognized as something immoral and "dirty"

These views are shared in the short stories *Professor Park Crossing the Flood* by Y1 Kün-yöng (1948) and *Twenty Five Years* by Chu Yo-söp (1950). *Professor Park Crossing the Flood* objectively elucidates the American military government's pressure to instigate conflicts and schism between the intellectuals. For example, happenings such as a professor being unfairly dismissed from the university because he is involved in leftist politics or the legitimization of an opportunist who dreams of once again accumulating wealth and power by acting the sycophant to an American officer, just as he did before with the Americans' Japanese counterpart during the colonial period, are depicted in the story.

In the case of *Twenty Five Years*, the futile realities of an intellectual who had studied in America and returned in hopes of contributing his newly acquired knowledge to the new society are described. Instead of utilizing his knowledge fully, under the biased reign of the American military government he is reduced to

being an errand-boy who does trivial translations and interpretations just to survive. The unjustifiable errors in the recruitment and promotion of Korean government officials, repeatedly committed by the American military government, serve to expose the *despondency and dispiritedness of the intellectuals at that time*.

America, emerging as the new dominant power in the arena of post-liberation Korea, is not portrayed in a favorable light in Korean modern fiction. The rejection of the American military as an obstacle to the creation of Korea as an independent nation also contributed to these negative perceptions. These sentiments were echoed in a jingle as "American military government, go back to where you came from with your soldiers!" American lifestyles and attitudes exacerbated the aversion Koreans already felt toward America due to cultural differences. Thus, although the anti-American movement from an ideological point of view, was led primarily by leftists, the American military was rejected on both social and cultural levels as well

### 3.

The establishment of an American military government unwilling to abdicate its role as an occupation force, along with the activities of the Soviet military in North Korea around the same time, can only be described as the beginning of the national division that would force two separate Koreas and two different ideologies upon the Korean people. Although the military government may have tried various political maneuvers to achieve reunification, the preoccupation with the military division of occupation forces along the 38th Parallel tied the government to the realities of a divided nation. The ideologies pursued by America and the Soviet Union were forced upon their respective occupying areas, with the consequences being the creation of an ideological schism among Koreans.

Even after the division became solidified and an independent government of South Korea was formed, the image of the American military as an occupation force acquired during the reign of military government was not erased. Particularly, the role of the American military as a reinforcement force during the Korean War was substantial, and the American military was perceived in a positive light by the general public. But after the war ended, America acquired greater political influence, and the picture of America presented at this period was one of absolute legitimacy, in which any critical attitude toward it was not permitted. The dictatorial decisions made by the government at that time to designate any anti-American

activity or criticism of America as anti-patriotic especially reenforced the image of America as one of absolute legitimacy.

In this context then, America, to prolong its military presence on the peninsula, constructed bases in several areas, distributed mass quantities of relief material to Koreans, and spread American culture into Korean society. Particularly, the American soldiers stationed in Korea, who became directly connected with the daily lives of many Koreans, emerged as a problem. Accordingly, in the fiction of the post-war era, the problems related to American soldiers surfaced frequently, as the broadening American military presence became increasingly intertwined with the lives of Koreans. Particularly interesting among such portrayals is the relationship between American soldiers and Korean prostitutes. Through the lives of a new class of women termed 'Western Princesses', a number of short stories describe the presence of the American military in Korean society.

*Undercurrent* by Ch'oe In-uk (1953) describes the degradation of an educated woman, who was forced to make a living amidst the hopeless realities of post-war Korea, through prostitution catering to American soldiers. The narrator of the story is the brother of the woman, who was drafted into the military during the war. When he finally finds his sister living in Taegu after the war, his sister has already become a prostitute. Unable to recover from the shock and despair, he volunteers for the military yet again.

In *Misfire* by Yi P'ŏm-sŏn (1959), one can witness the dissolution of a family in which a sister becomes a prostitute and a brother is reduced to becoming a thief.

In the case of *A Royal Tomb and Stationary Troops* by Ha Kŭn-ch'an (1962), the story deals with cultural differences between Koreans and American soldiers and the problems arising from them rather than the issue of poverty, but the character of a provincial woman who follows an American soldier and becomes a prostitute also appears in this story. *Sorry Kim* by Song Pyŏng-su (1957) introduces prostitutes living in 'parasitic villages' around American military bases as its characters and describes their pitiful lives where they have to sell their bodies for money. The image of a prostitute being taken away to a prison and losing all her hard-earned money after getting caught in the barracks 'servicing' the soldiers is sharply etched into the reader's mind.

All these stories share a common trait in that the ghastly lives of the main characters, instead of the emotional confrontation between Koreans and the American soldiers appearing in the stories, are the main concern of these works. In other words, the daily lives of prostitutes are depicted as a part of the gloomy and painful realities of post-war existence, and the American soldiers appear only as

their 'partners'.

However, the acquiescent views expressed in these fictions shifted with an incident in the mid-1960s that shocked the Korean literary community. That incident was the scandal created by Nam Chŏng-hyŏn's short story *Land of Dung* (1965). Nam's story introduced American soldiers stationed in Korea in order to focus on their misconduct, unlike the point of view of stories written prior to the mid-1960s where the introduction of the soldiers served to illustrate the pitiful lives of Koreans or a few opportunistic Koreans whose lives were connected with the presence of those soldiers. The hero of this story initially bears no ill-will toward America and its military, as is evident from his willingness to go to a welcoming parade with his sister and mother, holding both Korean and American flags after the liberation. However, his view soon begins to change as his mother dies after becoming insane from the shock of a rape committed by an American soldier. The hero, meanwhile, stays at his grandparents' house with his sister and later joins the military during the Korean War. After the war, while living in abject poverty after being discharged from the military, he encounters his sister who is now living as the mistress of an American soldier. Although he resigns himself to being a black-market dealer of American military relief supplies, freeloading off his sister, he is outraged at the abuse that the American soldier pours on his sister. When the wife of the American soldier comes to Korea, the hero lures her out to a mountain and rapes her. Eventually, the American military finds this out and sends out soldiers to surround the mountain where he is hiding.

*Land of Dung* emphasizes the wickedness of the American military by correlating the death of the mother and the sufferings of the sister with the cruelty of the American soldier. Because of these correlations, the Korean government handed down a guilty verdict to the author, citing the anti-communist law, the crime being "the story's tendency to promote anti-American sentiments and to create a schism in Korean-American relations". Of course no real sentence was served by the writer, but this incident clearly indicates just how little the criticism of America and the American military was tolerated by the Korean government.

After the *Land of Dung* incident, there was a visible hiatus of stories expressing negative images of the American military. Rather, during the 1970s a new type of fiction emerged, which displayed an effort to understand as a whole the peculiarity of villages around military bases and the social positions occupied by the villages' principal constituents, the prostitutes for soldiers. *America* by Cho Hae-il (1972) characterizes the prostitutes in the military base villages not as individual entities, but as a collective social class. It also shows that there is a special code of ethics

and regulations derived from humanistic ideals associated with the lives of these prostitutes. Therefore, to obtain compensation for the death of a prostitute at the hands of an American soldier, the other prostitutes even stage a demonstration as a group. However, no matter how hard the prostitutes in the village try to overcome the obstacles presented by their social positions, the circumstances always force them into despair and prevent them from escaping from their marginal lives.

In *Shriek of a Mongrel* by Ch'ŏn Sŭng-se (1974), the meaning of the existence of the prostitutes is given a clearer assessment. The main character's two kinds of lives represented by the names 'Dambi Kim' used while soliciting, and 'Ŭnju', her real name, give enough evidence to characterize her life as fatalistic. This fiction states that her ineffectiveness against her oppressive existence is derived from the paradoxes of social structure and points out that one of the reasons for these paradoxes is the presence of American military and the villages around the military bases.

As discussed in the above paragraphs, during the period between the end of the Korean War and the beginning of the 1970s, the American military appearing in the fiction is depicted from a negative point of view. However, because this negative portrayal simply reflects upon a part of the grim realities of Korea, one cannot conclude that this negative portrayal indicates the viewpoint or reactions of Koreans toward America as a country. It would be more appropriate to assert that individual American soldiers emerge as the source of problems in the lives of Koreans. However, one should realize that the stories using the prostitutes as their subject matter share a few common themes, such as the expression of a deep sense of sorrow resulting from harsh realities, along with a feeling of nationalistic shame, confrontation of the problems caused by the American military with individual morality in the realms of social ethics by taking on the issue of American soldiers' inhuman brutality, and the conspicuous absence of ideological resistance or defiance against the American military.

#### 4.

The Korean stance against America grows out of an amalgamation of individual moral criticisms pertaining to the realm of social ethics, and this attitude attains the quality of collective ideology in the early 1980s. The burning of the U. S. Information Service office in Pusan in March, 1982 serves as an example of the realization of the change in attitude. Although this incident was an un-premeditated



act of violence committed by a few extreme radicals, the incident created enormous controversy due to the sensitive political undertones behind the action. The political dissatisfaction was clearly enunciated with the public outcry for an explanation of America's attitude toward the formation of the 5th Republic and the Kwangju massacre of May, 1980. Many Koreans had already taken exception to America's egocentric international politics that placed its self-interest above everything else. The Vietnam war and the possible involvement, or at least the indifference, of America in the political maneuvering connected with the Kwang-Ju massacre led Koreans to realize the need for a new perspective in looking at America.

In the midst of these social situations, an effort was made by fiction writers to provide insight into the true nature of America *Red Moon* by Kim Sang-yŏl (1987), which questions the significance behind America's presence in modern Korean history, and *Whistle in the Barbed Wire* by Pak Sŏk-su (1982), which approaches the prolonged stationing of American military in Korea from the angle of social history will be discussed first.

*Red Moon* uses the burning of the USIS office in Pusan, which became a kind of litmus test of Korean-American relations at the beginning of its story. Through the grumbling complaint of a woman who had earlier witnessed her brother's trial over his alleged involvement in the incident, the story presents how the presence of America has left its mark on the psyche of Koreans. Because this woman had earlier given birth to an Amerasian child while working as a prostitute and later became a waitress in a bar after the American soldier left her, she vehemently expressed her hatred of American soldiers. But the focus of the story does not lie with this woman's individual reaction based on emotions.

*Red Moon* is characterized by the description of the manner in which an ordinary Korean family loses its homogeneity and experiences the disintegration of family structure in front of a colossal power, America. The heroine's mother ran a business dealing with American soldiers and later ran away with one of them to America, abandoning the family; her oldest brother became a naturalized citizen of America; her other older brother became institutionalized in a mental hospital after causing an accident while working on an American military base; and even her younger brother is now imprisoned because of his involvement in the USIS incident. Through these coincidences the course of the destruction of the family is closely connected to America.

*Whistle in the Barbed Wire* persuasively describes how an entity such as a military base village can possibly be established inside Korean society, using a village named 'Suk-kogae' as its setting. Whereas *Red Moon* focuses on the course

of the disintegration of family structure and the expansion and reproduction of such actions in a social and historical context, this story affirms the existing social paradox by recounting the destruction of an ordinary Korean village because of the stationing of an American military base there and the subsequent transformation of the community into a military base village. This fiction relates the story of a farmer, who had been cultivating the land for generations, adapting to the tragic realities resulting after his lands are commandeered amidst the disintegration of family structure and the deterioration of customs and traditions that they had adamantly held onto over the years.

The novel *Shade of Arms* by Hwang Sök-yöng (1988) interprets the Vietnam War not as a war of ideology but as a profiteering expedition by American defense industries. The author states that American entrepreneurs produced arms in mass quantities according to their management policies and protracted the Vietnam War which had become an enormously lucrative market. This story criticized the attitude of America taking advantage of the corruption in the Vietnamese government and the existing paradoxes in the social structure to achieve its self-interested aim of becoming a model neo-colonialist power, the characteristic form of late 20th century Western imperialism. *Shade of Arms* endorses the pragmatic acceptance of the realities of America by emphasizing that the coldheartedness and expansionism that characterizes American capitalism is also backed by its relatively limitless power.

## 5.

The Americans and America considered in modern Korean stories are condensed into the image of an American soldier stationed in Korea. Despite the various benefits possessed by the culture of America as a developed country and prevalent admiration of the land of fortune, America by the Korean people, Korean fiction focuses on the negative aspects of American soldiers.

The absolute position occupied by the American military stationed in Korea is not going to change as long as the tense situation of the national division exists. This static condition is due to the significant purport given to the presence of American military as a deterrent to the outbreak of war and to its acceptance by Koreans. Modern Korean fiction has never endorsed a radical theory advancing the withdrawal of American military. They only discuss the problems arising from the presence after accepting the military presence as an undeniable reality.

## GLOSSARY

Ch'ae Man-shik 蔡萬植

Ch'oe In-uk 崔仁旭

Ch'ŏn Sŭng-se 千勝世

Cho Hae-il 趙海一

Chu Yo-sŏp 朱耀燮

Ha Kŭn-ch'an 河瑾燦

Hwang Sŏk-yŏng 黃哲映

Kim Sang-yŏl 金相烈

Nam Chŏng-hyŏn 南廷賢

Pak Sŏk-su 朴石秀

Song Pyŏng-su 宋炳洙

Yi Kŭn-yŏng 李根榮

Yi Pŏm-sŏn 李範宣

Yi Sang-mun 李相文

Yŏm Sang-sŏp 廉想涉