

INTRODUCTION TO HYŎN CHINGŎN'S "HOME"

By BRUCE FULTON

Hyŏn Chingŏn (1900–1943) was born in Taegu and was educated there and in Japan and China. While still a schoolboy in Japan he and other budding writers such as Yi Sanghwa produced a journal called *Kŏhwa* (Torch). First published in 1920, Hyŏn had turned out some two dozen stories by the time that “Kohyang,” the story translated here, appeared in 1926, in his story collection *Chosŏn ūi ōlgul* (The faces of Korea). Much of his working life was taken up with editorial positions at the *Shidae ilbo* and *Tonga ilbo* newspapers. Late in his short life he turned to historical novels.

Hyŏn along with Yŏm Sangsŏp and Kim Tongin deserves major credit for laying the foundation for the modern Korean short story. His short fiction, starkly realistic third-person narratives such as “Sul kwŏnhanŭn sahoe” (A society that drives you to drink, 1921) and the ironically titled “Unsu choŭn nal” (A lucky day, 1924) as well as first-person confessional narratives such as “Pinch’ŏ” (The poor wife, 1921) and “Kohyang,” provide us with invaluable slices of life in colonial Korea. These and other stories were collected in *Chosŏn ūi ōlgul*, arguably the first modern Korean story collection to stand the test of time.

“Kohyang” (Home) is the source of the phrase *Chosŏn ūi ōlgul*, which in the story is applied to the worn visage of the oddly dressed individual the narrator finds sitting across from him on a train bound for Seoul. Like the author himself, this unskilled laborer has lived in China and Japan and is seeking his future in the colonial capital. But the story includes other “faces of Chosŏn” as well, including a Japanese and a Chinese. In depicting a foreign presence on Korean soil, Hyŏn echoes two important works of fiction, one published twenty years earlier—Yi Injik’s *shin sosŏl* (new fiction) *Hyŏl ūi nu* (Tears of blood, 1906)—and one published twenty years later—Ch’ae Manshik’s “Misut’ŏ Pang” (Mister Pang, 1946). The former work opens in the hills outside P’yŏngyang with a scene of the carnage wreaked by the Sino-Japanese War while the protagonist of the latter story, who like the man on the train has made the rounds of East Asia, seeks his fortune amid the chaos of a “liberated” peninsula occupied by the US and the USSR.

Another “face of Chosŏn” is the ancestral village turned ghost town, an image of the migration of colonial subjects to Manchuria that foreshadows subsequent momentous population shifts on the Korean peninsula: of native northerners to the south and native southerners to the north during the post-Liberation years, the refugee movements during the Korean War, and the movement of human labor from the countryside to the capital of Seoul and its satellite cities during the Park Chung Hee era of industrialization. Other “faces” are that of the agrarian landscape, newly controlled by the Oriental Development Company and its comprador landlords, and those of the girls and women who, like the childhood playmate and potential bride of our oddly dressed hero, have been sold into servitude in modern times. “Kohyang” in short depicts an ancestral home whose features have been distorted beyond recognition.

HOME

By HYŎN CHINGŎN
Translated by JINNY SIM

It was on the train from Taegu to Seoul that the man caught my attention. He was sitting across the aisle from me, and I began to watch him out of curiosity. Beneath his traditional Korean outer coat peeped a kimono and a calico jacket. His well-worn trousers were Chinese in style, made of a dark brown fabric of wax-paper fiber. He wore leggings and sandals but no hat to cover his crewcut. It was one of those peculiar episodes that happen once in a lifetime, a strange gathering contrived by mere chance. Oddly coincidental, the space he and I took up inside the compartment was occupied by men of three different countries. Sitting next to me was a Chinese man, and a Japanese man sat beside the man across from me. There seemed to be a sort of significance to the attire of this man sitting across from me, a blend of three Asian national costumes. He spoke Japanese rather well, if a bit irritatingly, and his Chinese didn't sound too bad, either.

He tried to strike up a conversation, saying, "*Doko made aide desu ka?*" (Where are you going?) and carrying on about how Tokyo was so-and-so, how Osaka was thus-and-such, how Koreans eat incredible amounts of hot pepper, how Japanese food was so bland that at first he felt nauseated, and so on. Listening to his idle chatter, the Japanese man merely rubbed his stubby mustache between his thumb and index finger, nodded incessantly, and reluctantly snorted an occasional "*Soo desu ka?*" (Is that so?). His unreceptivity led the fellow across from me to latch on next to the Chinese man, assailing him with "*Ni shang nar qu?*" (Where are you going?) and "*Nin xing shenme?*" (What's your name?). The Chinese man didn't really respond either, except to flash an enigmatic, Cheshire-like smile across his blank, oily-slick face. The Korean man continued with his constant mumbling about something or other, caught my gaze, and smiled.

It was the kind of smile an animal trainer in a circus might make as he looks to his spectators for applause in recognition of his marvelous skill. I coldly avoided his gaze. He was brash and offensive to an almost nauseating degree. He fell silent a short time and then, seemingly bored, he scratched his head, gnawed at his fingernails, and looked out the window awhile. Obviously unable to keep his peace any longer, he suddenly looked my way and asked with a thick Kyŏngsang accent, "Where're you going?"

"Seoul."

“Is that so? That’s great. I’m going to Seoul myself. I guess that makes us fellow travelers.”

I had nothing to say to his overly friendly manner of speaking, and I wasn’t in the mood to force an answer. So I kept silent.

“Have you lived in Seoul long?”

Although I found him annoying, I felt compelled to reply. “It’s been six or seven years.”

“Say, that’s a long time! This’ll be my first time. When we get off the train, is there any place to stay for day laborers? Something like a *gijinyado* (flophouse), as they say in Japan?”

And then, as if he’d suddenly been reminded of his frustrated state, his face turned to a scowl, something I found suited his face rather better than a smile. Each and every strand of his eyebrows was strewn about and drooping down; the space between his eyes harbored several wrinkles. No sooner did the flesh of his cheeks appear to shimmer over the top of his cheekbones than his cheeks caved in again, as if he had puckered up on something bitter like sumac, twisting his lips to the left and wrenching them upward. He couldn’t have been a day over thirty but the tears welling up in his squinting eyes made him look a decade older. Examining the expression of a face that had suffered such hardship, I felt my aversion toward him ease, and I responded.

“Hmm, there are the Laborers’ Quarters, I suppose.”

After asking me about Laborers’ Quarters to the last detail, he added, “You think I’d be able to get work?” He was clinging to me like a beggar.

“I really don’t know what sort of work a person could find,” I answered rather too coldly, and immediately felt sorry for my unfriendliness. But I was ignorant on the subject of job openings, so could give no better answer than this. Instead, I tried a different tack.

“Where is it that you are traveling from?”

“I left from my home village.” He said this with a deep sigh that set the tone for the story about to unravel, the tale of the pathetic lot that fate had dealt him. Located in Kyōngsang Province, his hometown was a secluded village not far from Taegu, and the residents, just over a hundred households in total, made a living by tilling the lands adjacent to the old post station; what they were left with was more ample than tilling the land of a private landowner. Though the necessities of life were never exactly plentiful, the inhabitants of this peaceful farm village got along without having to envy others. But no sooner was the world turned upside down by the Japanese takeover than the land ended up in the hands of the Oriental Development Company. Even then it would have been preferable if they had simply ended up paying tenancy fees directly to the company, but so-

called "tenant farmer brokers" came onto the scene. Not once had they themselves ever soiled their hands with the earth, but they took on the role of tenant farmer for the ODC, and at the same time served as landlord to those who actually worked the land. Once the farmers paid their crop rent to the company, and after they'd been shaken down again by the middleman, the yield remaining to them never amounted to more than a measly three percent. More and more people could be heard chanting, "I wish I could die" and "I can't go on," like some monk praying to the Buddha. Those roaming off to other parts, the men backpacking their belongings, the women toting them atop their heads, became an increasingly frequent sight and the village slowly withered away.

Nine years ago, in the spring of the year in which he had turned seventeen (his age was now twenty-six; how poverty and suffering age a person!), hearing that it was a good place to live, he and his family had moved to Western Kando in Manchuria. But no matter where one goes when driven from one's home village, it can never really be a new and refreshing place of comfort. And is it reasonable to suppose that fertile fields would somehow just be waiting for them to cultivate? In fact they found that all the choice land had been snatched up by the previous arrivals; what remained was wasteland. And so from their day of arrival they worried constantly about their next meal. But no matter how one tried, it was impossible to eke enough from the harsh earth to last the whole year long. They would plant their crops with seed and tools borrowed from others, but ultimately the harvest left them empty-handed. What they did during those first two years could hardly be called living; rather, they were forced to just hang on. Then his father suddenly fell sick and passed away, a forlorn soul on foreign soil. Barely nineteen years old, he assumed the care of his widowed mother, but within just four years of their miserable hand-to-mouth existence she had worked herself to death.

"So even your mother died."

"Yeah—passed away without even a mouthful of decent rice gruel."

He suddenly fell silent. I imagined glistening tears seeping from his eyes and could find no encouraging words to say. After hesitating a moment I removed the stopper from the bottle of *chŏngjong* my friends had bought me before I boarded the train. I poured both of us a cup and we drank. As if to melt away the sad and cruel destiny had dealt him, he tossed off four more drinks before continuing his story. Not wanting to stay where he had lost both parents, he traveled to Shinŭiju in the northwest, then across the Amnok River to Antung in Manchuria, working at odd jobs along the way before continuing on to Japan. He worked at a coal mine in Kyushu for a while, and even the ironworks in Osaka. But try as he might, he found it impossible to save money. And the pent-up anger surging within him

would not allow him to gather dust in one place. His frustration and longing for his native land had finally launched him on a pilgrimage to his native village combined with a search for work in Seoul.

I sighed. "I don't suppose there was anyone back home to greet you?"

"Are you kidding? The village was gone, empty— it had vanished."

"I guess so, after nine years. It must have changed a lot."

"Changed? There wasn't a thing left! No houses, no people, not even a mangy dog."

"So it was a ghost town?"

"That's right. Half-crumbling walls, all hunched over, like. Nothing else. Not even the foundation of the house we used to live in. I couldn't find it anywhere. Have you ever seen a village just disappear like that?" His voice cracked and rose a notch. "Nothing but rotten rafters and foundation stones lying around. It was like tombs had been dug up and the skeletons torn apart and flung about. Do things like that happen in this life? Barely ten years and a village of over a hundred households gone just like that! I can't believe it." He sighed. As if picturing the scene before his very eyes, he looked off blankly before gulping the drink I had poured him. Two or three thick droplets fell from his face. "It really made my chest want to burst, just burst!"

Through his cold, dreary tears I felt I could discern a clear image of the miserable face of Korea. After a while I asked him again, "Did you see anyone you knew?"

"Yeah, there was one person. Just one."

"A relative?"

"Nope. She used to live in the same neighborhood." His face slipped into an even deeper melancholy.

"You must have been delighted to see her!"

"You bet I was—it was like she'd risen from the dead. Besides, this was the girl I even had a sort of prior acquaintance with..."

"Prior acquaintance?"

"There was talk of us marrying."

"Really?" I felt my jaw drop in surprise.

"Her situation wasn't much better than mine," he said. The girl was two years older than himself. Being from the same neighborhood, they had grown up playing and squabbling together. From the time he was four there was talk between their parents of marriage and already from a young age he had rather fancied her. But in the winter of her seventeenth year the future suddenly became uncertain. He learned that her father had sold her off to a brothel in Taegu for twenty *wŏn*, and once word of this spread, the girl's family could live in the village

no longer and had to move far away. After that, of course, they never saw each other. And then after all that time, on a brief visit to his home village (now no more than vacant land), he had encountered this woman who had almost become his wife. She was looking after the children in some Japanese household. For ten years she had saved up to pay off her buying price of twenty *wŏn*, but there were still sixty *wŏn* remaining in debts to the landlord. Her body, contaminated by some virulent disease, had left her looking like a walking corpse, but she was fortunate enough to have been let go last autumn by her landlord, who wrote off her debts as an act of mercy. Like him, when she found her way back to the home she had so longed for over the past decade, she found that it no longer existed and her parents had long since left. All that remained was a lonely pile of rocks with which to share her tears. After a day of mourning and weeping she had gone into town and wandered about. Thanks to the one or two phrases of Japanese she had managed to pick up over the last ten years she was able to find work in the Japanese household.

"Granted, people change, but how could a person change so much? So drastically? Her thick hair had stripped off and fallen away. Her eyes were sunken and her once shiny complexion looked like someone had splattered it with acid."

"The two of you must have had a good cry."

"I couldn't even muster any tears. We went into a Japanese noodle place and between the two of us finished ten bottles of sake before going our separate ways."

He let out a tortured sigh, painfully venting his accumulated despair, clearly weary of reliving the vivid memories inscribed on his soul.

"What's the point of talking about it?" He fell silent, enveloped in sadness.

Hearing this tale of his life, so miserable and unfair, left me with a bitter taste.

"Let's drink," I said. We exchanged several more cups, emptying the bottle. And then, overcome by drink-induced lassitude, he lapsed into a song we used to sing as kids, oblivious to the meaning of the words:

*Fields where mountains of rice once stood
are now just a highway...
The friend who spoke his mind
languishes now in prison...
The old man who emptied ashes from his pipe
is nought but a heap of dirt and dust...
The girl with the pretty face
toils now in a brothel.*

JINNY SIM (hjinsim1@gmail.com) is an alumnus of the Department of Asian Studies at the University of British Columbia, Canada.