The history of modern Korean literature has been powerfully influenced by three related constellations of events. The first was the complex series of efforts and counter-efforts during the closing decades of the nineteenth century and first decade of the twentieth to revise, reform, reawaken Korean society, culture, economic practices, government, education, and other relevant components in the enlightenment movement, to modernize Korea itself so that it could survive and prosper, in the social Darwinian sense of the times. Korean efforts, successes and setbacks both, but overall the impression of activity, drew the attention of Japan, which had started the same process one generation earlier, prompted in turn to go all out in the effort by the 1854 visit of Commodore Matthew Perry’s Black Ships. Japanese notice led to the second event and condition, the Japanese occupation of Korea in 1910, and the installation of a colonial regime that lasted until Korea’s “liberation” in 1945 at the end of World War II. Immediately following liberation, however, Korea was partitioned between the United States and the Soviet Union, an action originally intended to establish temporary zones for the two sides, then allies, to accept the regional surrender of Japanese forces. The temporary turned long-term, however, as cold war rivalries prolonged the confrontation of the Western powers. In 1950, war broke out between the political Left and Right, aligned geopolitically with the northern and southern regimes and eventually drawing the two major powers as well as a host of other participants—notably including the Peoples Republic of China—into its maelstrom.

Lasting from the end of the war in 1953 until the present, the prolonged division became one of the major concerns of an influential group of writers in the 1980s. Coupled with the repeated invocation of the North Korean threat, the division provided the handiest rationale during the Park Chung Hee regime (1961-1979) for severe repression of political dissent and of literature that in any way supported it. Only during the last few years of the decade of the 1980s did reunification lose its taboo status as a subject and therefore come to be seen less as the (hidden) object of writing than an accepted premise.
The Japanese Occupation of Korea has also exerted its influence on the post-1950 writing scene in a number of ways, both direct and indirect, and it may be useful to note a few of these in order to establish for the reader who may be less familiar with the history, or who may think that Korea’s cultural and political history as a “modern nation” really started only after the end of the Korean War, that the themes, subjectivities, objects, and loci of tension in Korean literature have in fact been relatively consistent throughout the twentieth century, or at least until its closing years. What are these influences, conditions, context, loci? First and most obviously, the Japanese repressed and then imposed an outright ban on literary or other expression in the Korean language. Nationalists who removed themselves from Korea, or who stayed and wrote in Korea until it was no longer possible and then still kept on, are heroes in the cultural histories of the period. Many accommodated, some completely, others to a lesser degree. The former—writers like the pioneers Yi Kwangsu and Ch’oe Namsôn—were vilified during the post liberation period but more recently offered some degree of literary and ideological rehabilitation. The latter continue to occupy a supremely tendentious zone in Korea’s history. A scandal broke out in 1986, for example, with the publication of the first two volumes of Selected Pro-Japanese Literary Works, Ch’inil munhak sônjip, among which are essays, poems, and other materials produced by a number of prominent writers in the South Korean literary world.

As an instance of foreign economic and political power exercised in Korea, the Japanese occupation evokes bitter memories but also raises questions about the Western powers for their evident neglect of, or collusion in, Korea’s status as an occupied territory. The United States did not discourage Japan’s moves leading toward the 1910 occupation, and failed to respond in any substantial way in 1919 to the March First Independence Movement, even though the events of 1919 clearly were prompted by President Woodrow Wilson’s 1918 announcement of the Fourteen Points. The United States did respond to South Korea’s perilous situation in 1950, and for decades after the Korean War, the sense of appreciation for the American intervention was palpable nearly everywhere in the south. More recently, though, it has been noticed in the south that the United States was the initial instigator of the 1945 division, that the US
commitment of troops in 1950 was at least as much motivated by anxiety about the supposed Red menace as by concern for the people of (south) Korea, and that lingering American implication in the cold war was a factor in the continuing division. Again in 1980, when the citizens of Kwangju, a city in the southwestern part of Korea, were brutally assaulted by Korean government troops, the United Stated not only failed to intervene, but seemed to have given at least tacit approval to the detailing of the troops to Kwangju.

Such political issues have formed a significant strand in Korean literature throughout the twentieth century, one that shapes a reading of even the most “aesthetic” or purely literary works, and gives an at times pejorative sense to the term *sunsup’a*, the pure literary school, as contrasted with the *ch’amyôp’a*, or commitment group. It spills over into the assumption that when one speaks of Korean literature, one normally means—without meaning to—either literature written in Korea prior to the 1945 division or literary works written in South Korea in the years since. Just now, in the beginning months of the year 2001, there is a joint north-south project underway to assemble and publish a one-hundred-volume edition of modern Korean literature. Perhaps in the first decade of the new millennium it will be possible to draw from that project to make available in English translation a supplement to the present volume. A new generation of younger scholars of Korean literature, several of whom contributed their efforts to the present anthology, seem ready to do so, and we join in the hope that they will have the chance, and soon.

**Modern Korean Poetry: Before 1950**

An introduction to an anthology such as this one has several tasks to fulfill. It should explain what, in this case, is meant by modern Korean poetry. It should provide some sense of the major writers and their works, of the sequences in which they appeared; what distinguishing features can be discerned, in English translation, in the writers and their productions; what links or resemblances or divergences there are to be noted among them; and finally, something about how to read them.

Modern Korean poetry is generally said to have begun with a single poem, “From the Sea to Youth,” published in 1908 in the journal *Youth*. The
author was also the journal editor and publisher, Ch’oe Namsôn, and the poem functioned at the time it was published as a sort of verse-form editorial, another in the large array of materials that the editor-publisher presented in the pages of his journal as part of his campaign to inspire modernizing change and reform in the new generation of Korea’s youth, so that the country might take its proper place in the modern world. In most histories of Korean literature, the poem is granted a certain degree of historical significance, but denigrated for its bombastic tone and other un-literary qualities, including its thematic resemblance to the closing stanzas of Lord Byron’s “Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage.”

This is already a considerable amount of information, short as the preceding paragraph is, about one poem; and the information is itself more complicated than it may first appear to be. What, for instance, accounts for the split in historical attitude regarding Ch’oe’s place in Korean history and his significance as a literary (or other) figure? Was the journal an inspired and inspiring iconoclastic gesture of some sort, or did it have predecessors and descendants? And the poem: Was it unusual for a poem to take on a hortatory, didactic role? Or were there other aspects of the poem that make it seem to qualify as a first? Could it be that in some way it does work as a poem? Even the year has a certain post-facto significance. The poem was published just two years before the Japanese colonial annexation of Korea, which is also to say, two years before all the journals and newspapers were shut down in Korea; two years before Korean hopes were dashed that their country would remain independent.

Ch’oe went on, as Korea went on, as time and history went on. He drafted the 1919 Korean Declaration of Independence; produced several important anthologies and studies of Korean literary and cultural history in the 1920s; and agitated, during the final years of the colonial occupation, with unseemly vigor on behalf of Japanese imperial military aims. That collaborationist stain mars his entry in Korean history, as it does the stories of others who survived or even got ahead by working with the Japanese authorities, but it also stains the history itself. From 1910 until the Japanese defeat at the end of World War II in 1945, Korean literature was produced under extremely challenging and increasingly conflicting circumstances. Although the colonial government exerted its control
over publications and education, beginning in 1910, both before and after the
year of annexation numbers of Korea’s youth went off to Japan to study. There
too, as in Korea itself, they encountered new ideas, news of the world; they read
Japanese translations of exciting foreign literary works; and they brought them,
when they returned to Korea, to the colony, back with them. Similarly inspiring
ideas and literary models had begun to be tried out and explored in the two
decades prior to annexation, a span of time and activity known as the
Enlightenment Period, but then the reform measures that did get underway ran
into the mirror-like wall of the 1910 annexation, which stripped Korea and
Koreans of their sovereignty and national agency.

Japan, then, was both a place where the new could be encountered and
explored, a model, in some respects, of a successful response to European and
American political and economic power, and at the same time, the agent of
Korea’s national demise, the source of an array of disturbing controls,
prohibitions, and affronts to the Korean people. Japanese repression faltered
briefly when it encountered the March 1, 1919 Independence Movement, when
tens of thousands of Korea’s citizens heard the call of Ch’oe Namsôn’s
Declaration of Korean Independence and took to the streets in peaceful
demonstrations; but then the Japanese police hammered the demonstrators,
jailing them, killing them in the streets, even herding one group into a church in
one rural town and burning them. Soon after, however, in part due to
international concerns expressed about the brutality of the reaction, colonial
policy shifted, and Koreans were allowed to organize literary and other groups,
to publish their thoughts and works, and for a decade or so, there ensued a
vigorous Renaissance in Korean literary and intellectual activity.

Among the many poets striving in the decade of the 1920s to fashion a
new Korean poetic—explicitly modern poetry and poetic practice; poetry that
utilized the resources of the Korean language; and poetry that was not afraid to
adapt or adopt forms, themes, images either from foreign models or from
traditional Korean ones—two in particular stand out. Han Yongun published
one collection of poems in 1926, The Silence of Love, and then returned to his other
duties as a leader of the Korean Buddhist community. He had also been one of
the signers of the Declaration of Independence, had drafted the four codicils to
that document which called for nonviolent demonstrations, and had been
sentenced to prison for those activities. The poet Kim Sowŏl likewise produced
only one book, *Azaleas*, published in 1925. Where the former deployed a long
rhythmic line in his verse, and wrote about a vanished love which could be read
very easily as a symbol of the Korean nation, Sowŏl took traditional folk song
line forms, diction, and themes, and then redeployed them in a series of
exquisitely well wrought lyrics.

Other poets of the 1920s turned to socialist critique, especially after the
founding, in 1925, of the Korean Proletarian Artists Federation, known by its
Esperanto acronym KAPF. In an obvious sense, the socialist critique was an
imported perspective. In less obvious ways, though, even such famously Korean
poets as Han Yongun and Kim Sowŏl were responding in their poetry to foreign
influences or models, both artistic and political. Han for example, dedicated one
of the poems in his collection to the Bengali poet—and Nobel Prize
winner—Rabindranath Tagore, and there is a clearly palpable sense of Tagore’s
presence in the structure, flow, imagery, diction and subject of Han’s poems
throughout the book. Sowŏl, on the other hand, wrote an essay on “The Spirit of
Poetry” which quoted, in English, two stanzas by the British Symbolist poet
Arthur Symons, who was in turn a member of the literary circle that revolved
around William Butler Yeats. One of the latter’s poems, “He Wishes for the
Cloths of Heaven,” may well have prompted the chain of images that grew into
Sowŏl’s poem “Azaleas.”

The first book of modern poems published in Korea, as it happened, was
Kim Ôk’s collection of French Symbolist poets, and others- - including W. B.
Yeats. *The Dance of Anguish, Onoe ui mudo*, published in 1921, was followed in
1923 by Kim’s *Song of the Medusa, Haep’ari ui norae*, along with three other books
of poems, by Pak Chonghwa, Chu Yohan, and Pyŏn Yŏngno. There is much in
these collections of setting suns, autumn colors, a general sad and wistful air, all
seeming to resonate with the similar atmospheric effects of Verlaine’s “Song of
Autumn,” “Chanson d’ Automne.” Kim Ôk described French poetry as the zenith
of the literary arts, a claim by extrapolation for the aesthetic validity of the
Korean poetry written with or against it. At the same time, in his preface to *Song
of the Medusa*, Yi Kwangsu staked out the Korean nationalist frame of reference
for those works by his repeated references to the land of a people who wear white clothes, and the sadness and disappointment afflicting it, and them.

Sowôl’s Azaleas, when it was published in 1925, was just the fourteenth book of poems to have been published in Korea in the twentieth century. Han Yongun’s *The Silence of Love*, published in 1926, was the sixteenth. Much of the creative energy of the time seems to have gone into the journals that began to be published in considerable numbers in the decade of the 1920’s. *Kaebyôk, The Creation*, during the six years of its publishing life, from 1920 to 1926, over seventy-two issues, brought out a wide variety of poems by dozens of young poets, notable among whom were Kim Sowôl and Yi Yuksa. It wasn’t until 1936 that the number of poetry books published in a given year reached ten. In 1939 the number passed twenty, but then dropped through the remainder of the Second World War. In 1948 the number passed forty, but then dropped again during the Korean War. In 1986 it had reached three hundred and ninety four. It is worth noting explicitly just how new, fragile in terms of its newness and the Japanese colonial presence, and conflicted, caught as it was between the political and the poetical, the Korean literary world truly was during the decade of the nineteen-twenties.

Literary journals continued to provide a significant medium for publishing in the 1930’s. Two notable poets appeared: Yi Sang, whose startling Modernist prose and poetic works continue to delight and provoke, and Chông Chiyong. The two poets, other translators of a variety of foreign works, and the many able practitioners of the short story, which seems to have reached a zenith during the politically repressive but aesthetically enlivened decade, inhabit what might seem to be something of a poetry recession following the Renaissance of the 1920’s. A new and in its way just as striking voice as Yi Sang’s was heard in the book *Flower Snake Collection, Hwasajip*, by Sô Chôngju, published in 1941, with its echoes of Baudelaire, earthy, sensual images, and unusually direct, personal statement. *White Deer Lake, Paeknokdam*, by Chông Chiyong, came out that same year. They were followed in 1945 by the woman poet No Ch’onmyông’s *By the Window, Ch’angbyôn*. 