

# **Preface to the Fortieth Anniversary Edition**

*Speech given at the Fiftieth International PEN Conference at Lugano,  
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Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen.

To begin with, let me tell you that this is one of the best-organized conferences that I have had the pleasure of participating in (and I have been to many). For that I would like to thank the organizers and the staff. I would like to thank the British Council of Hong Kong and the Department of English of Hong Kong University for creating the idea of this conference in the first place. I remember writing to Jill Martin and commending her and all those involved in organizing this conference for the very idea of hosting a conference of this nature. And I would also like to thank this conference—from a very personal point of view—for inviting me to participate in it because the invitation helped me—in a rather unexpected way, I confess—to clarify and define to some extent what I think of myself by understanding what others seem to think of me.

I am an American and have been one for more than a quarter of a century—but, as you all know, appearances can be deceiving. . . .

I live, and I have lived for more than twenty years, in a very liberal, small academic town in what must be the most liberal state in America—Massachusetts.

Now—my barber in that very liberal academic town in that most liberal state in the Union still greets me at each of my tonsorial visits to his shop by saying, “Well, you’re still here, eh?”

“Well, yes, I am still here as you can see.”

“So, what are you studying these days?”

That—after all those years of my academic life as professor of English at the university in his town.

I merely mumble something to the effect that I am, well, studying life, sort of.

Then there is this blue-eyed, blonde, lady bank teller who asks me where I am from—the sort of question no one ever asks my blue-eyed, brunette wife of Danish-German ancestry.

Again, I mumble, “Oh, from here and there.”

The lady and I are trying to untangle a bureaucratic mishap involving a quarter of a million dollars of our business account, and, speaking on the phone to someone at the main office of the bank, she says—oh, so sweetly—“Look, Jane, I have here with me a very nice foreign student who . . . blah, blah, blah . . .”

Well, it has been also like that for me in the States in my relation with the so-called American literary establishment.

I remember that when my first novel, *The Martyred*, was published in New York I was simply presumed to be and was presented as a Korean writer, and, no one, including myself, minded that—except the Koreans in Korea, especially Korean writers and critics who felt that since I wrote in English I lacked proper credentials and legitimate claims to be a Korean writer.

In fact, a professor-critic there who made his living mainly by putting out anthologies told me in all seriousness that

when I finally wrote something—by God, said he, anything—in Korean, he would certainly include me in one of his literary anthologies.

To this day, I am not considered, so I am told by Korean writers and critics, to be qualified as a proper Korean writer.

So it went till my third book was published in the States, when Professor Edward Sidensticker, an eminent authority on Japanese literature reviewing the book most favorably, referred to me as Richard Kim of Korea, whereupon the progressive, liberal staff of the *New York Times Book Review* listed the book in the *Review's* list “Editor’s Choice” and defined me categorically as a Korean-American writer. The dawn of hyphenated Americans (not all of them, mind you) has arrived.

But, that, of course, made the Korean writers and critics more adamant than ever about my literary status (or nonstatus).

Now, really, all this is quite silly, but what it all seemed to signify was that, from a literary point of view of categorizing writers, I was a very inconvenient writer indeed—both to the Koreans and to the Americans.

Well, I really was too busy doing this and that nonliterary thing to care much about all that, but I did want to look into this business of my Koreanness, so to speak, just to see, if for nothing else, if I could also write in Korean.

To make a long story short, it did turn out that I could indeed write in Korean, and thank God for that, and that was that. That is, as Dr. Han Suyin has remarked the other day, I could just think of myself as a writer at peace with the world, the whole world, in diverse cultures and languages, and let the literary intelligentsia and academicians worry about the rest.

And yet the very theme of this conference, not so much about “in English,” I confess, as about “Asian Voices,” has made me realize that, at last, I have now found one unequivocal, unchallengeable claim that I can make about myself, about my literary status and identity—I am an Asian writer. How nice!

Now, to this matter of “in English.” I do write in English,

more so than in Korean, and I think I can say that I am one writer who is madly in love with the first-person “I” of the English language—from the point of view of the metaphysics of Being.

The joy, excitement, and wonder that came to me when I first discovered the impact of the “I” in English—and I am sorry it is all so personal, not intellectual, that I really can’t go into it all at this point—well, it was like when, on my maiden voyage to the United States, in the middle of the vast Pacific Ocean, I came, alone, face to face with the sun emerging from the waves on the morning horizon . . . and it was then as if I saw the sun for the first time in my life, it speaking to me and I speaking to it.

I think it all went with my own private exploration, discovery, of my Self, now utterly alone, physically and psychologically, away from Korea toward the unknown . . .

And later, when I began to write in English, the “I” in Korean gave way willingly and joyously to the “I” in English—and it was like discovering and assuming a wholly new identity of Being and, with it, a wholly new way of seeing, thinking, cogitating, and understanding, having shed the Korean “I” that is not really “I” but that is subservient, always, to the Korean “we.”

And with all that came also my fascination with the relative pronouns of the English language. I don’t know about other writers whose native tongue is not English, but, for me, the relative pronouns of the English language forced me to think, to reason, to qualify, logically and rationally—in short, to make myself clearer to myself and to others. Thank you, whoever you are, for inventing the relative pronouns of the English language.

Now, what I am going to say and do in the remaining hour could not have been possible, I assure you, if I had not begun my writing life in the English language. I mean not only that I couldn’t have thought, written, and said it in the Korean language exactly the way I wanted but also that I couldn’t

have, perhaps, arrived at certain points intellectually and psychologically had I not been writing in the first-person “I” of the English language with its metaphysical implications.

Here, then, is a piece titled “Remembrance of Things Lost,” not of things merely past but of things lost . . .

*Remembrance of Things Lost*

One of the most important elements in Korean literature of the past and even the present—from the point of view of understanding Korean literature psychologically and philosophically—is the concept of *Han*.

*Han* is difficult to translate into other languages. It is a composite of ideas and emotions and everything that goes with a certain perception and understanding of humanity’s misfortunes and tragedies—all compressed into one single Chinese character. Because the character is shared by the Chinese and the Japanese as well, perhaps the Chinese and the Japanese may be able to understand the Korean version of *Han*—but only to a limited extent and even then with, I suppose, quite different shades of meanings and connotations and, therefore, emotional impact.

*Han*, in the Korean context, is—and this is purely my own personal understanding of it—a composite, as I have mentioned, of human responses and reactions to what we may call man’s inhumanity to man. Or—as Albert Camus might have put it—victims’ responses to their executioners.

*Han* can be expressed individually as well as collectively. *Han* contains a range of human emotions derived from one’s awareness of one’s doom—and that awareness is expressed with (and I list the following in no particular order or sequential significance): lamentation; a sense of loss, doom, and destruction; a certain amount of anger and resentment at one’s perception of unfairness inflicted upon oneself, that is, one’s sense of being an unfair victim; a fatalistic perception of a fundamentally, inexorably unfair, cruel universe, and an equally fatalistic resignation and final acceptance of one’s fate.

At this point, a literary example that comes to mind, one that may be more familiar to Western readers, is Franz Kafka's K in *The Trial* and his last three words uttered at the moment of his execution: "like a dog." But Korean *Han* is much more than that, I think, perhaps mainly because, with Korean *Han*, there always seems to be a collective sense of it even when only an individual *Han* is apparently involved. Perhaps, who knows, there is a collective racial sense and perception in it all—of sharing in Man's Fate, the Human Condition, by one and all.

Having said all that and also having said that *Han* is the most important element in Korean literature, I should now like to say that I have long ago declared myself free from the Korean version of *Han* and said goodbye to all that.

Now, what I would like to do is to share with you one Korean writer's will and effort to liberate himself and his characters from the iron grip, from the centuries-old clutch of *Han*. For what I have been trying to find in and through my writing is nothing less than the ways and means—psychological and philosophical—to destroy the Korean version of *Han*. But—why, one may ask.

I am of that generation of Koreans who have experienced the Japanese domination of Korea, the Soviet occupation of North Korea, and the American occupation of South Korea with the resultant division of the country, and I am one of that generation who fought in the bloody Korean War, of the generation that experienced in a very short period of time a heartbreaking, bone-crunching tyranny of inexorable History, a generation that was asked to sacrifice most and that willingly sacrificed most.

And—having experienced all that, having suffered through all that, and having survived to testify to the sacrifices, destruction, and unfulfilled aspirations of those of my generation both dead and alive—I found *Han* not to my liking, not worthy of my own and my generation's battle hymn, and not acceptable as my final dirge. More than that, I found that *Han*

had inhibited our will and spirit to wrestle our political freedom from the foreign powers and to explore and develop our own destiny.

*Han*—I realized—had made Koreans pliant before foreign powers and domination, subservient to foreign interests, and obsessed, masochistically and degradingly, with a petty, private, and baser instinct for only one's survival.

Surrounded by foreign interests, which were urging on and forcing on us an outmoded concept and practice of dialectical materialism on the one hand and, on the other, a quaint, outmoded political, economic liberalism rooted in alien soils of materialistic pursuit of an illusory happiness on earth, and equally alien, imported religions with conflicting promises of salvation, Koreans, with their ingrained sense of *Han* as a way of viewing the world and understanding their place in that world, have become in the past powerless and susceptible to accepting either consciously or unconsciously their roles as victims. It goes without saying, then, that *Han* in Korea has helped produce many a Korean flunkey and servant of foreign interests.

I found *Han*, therefore, degrading and repugnant. It has—you see—a smell of defeat and a stench of death—in the not yet completed confrontation and conflict between my own and others' small histories with a small h, and History with a capital H.

Of course, as Rubashov found in Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon*, as Kyo found in Andre Malraux's *Man's Fate*, and as Denisovich found in Alexandre Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*—just to name a few at random—History will no doubt crush and destroy small histories.

But—and this is to me the most important—it is not the fact that History will and shall destroy small histories that gives History its victory and small histories their defeats. Rather, it is how small histories confront History and battle with the tension of that confrontation and, though they may be ultimately crushed, fight the battle honorably without de-

spair and surrender and, thereby, liberate themselves from the tyranny of History and win their final victory.

How, then, one may ask, has my remembrance of things lost led me, through my writing, to the final denunciation of *Han*, which I would dearly love to consign to the dustbin of Korean history?

Certainly, what I am in search of in and through my writing are things lost to me personally and to Koreans in general by extension. To engage in remembrance of things lost is not only to remember and recall things lost but also to retrieve that which has been lost from the innermost niche of our souls.

And I and Koreans have a lot to retrieve from the past, from our misbegotten recent history. Our history—of thirty-six long years of colonization by the now defunct Japanese Empire—and of the savage Korean War that claimed millions of our lives—and of forty-five long, heartbreaking years of the division of our land, with millions of refugees and displaced persons and families torn asunder.

We had in the past lost a lot. We had lost our land to the Japanese; we had lost, because of that foreign domination, our country, which is to say a home to us, something much more than a mere nation-state. And, above all, we had lost even our names to the Japanese, who had forced us to adopt Japanese names. I would ask you to consider that extraordinary, historically unprecedented chapter in all histories of colonial experiences: a symbolic and quite ritualistic effort on the part of the colonizers, the oppressors, to alter the identity and destroy the self-respect of the colonized, the oppressed.

It was a brazen attempt by the imperial colonizers to erase and obliterate our history and, in the last analysis, our memories, our individual and collective memories. But, of course, it did not work out quite like that, and we have retrieved our names and all that goes with them—but still, we have a lot more that is lost to us, and we have a lot more to retrieve.

But here I ask myself—why is this all so important? What is it really that I am trying to retrieve?