

Sekyo Nam Haines translates Lee Yuk Sa (1904~1944)*

My wish to translate Lee Yuk Sa's poetry came to me three years ago while visiting the Lee Yuk Sa Memorial Hall in Andong, South Korea. A small, modern building nestled under a hill, the hall houses a collection of Yuk Sa's newspaper articles and letters, as well as the first editions of his poetry. Next to the hall stands a small traditional building, plucked out of Yuk Sa's original family complex, and relocated to this memorial site. Sitting on the dilapidated wooden deck of the old house, I thought of his poem "Green Grapes":

*July in my hometown
Is the season of green grapes ripening.
The legend of this village grows on the vine in clusters and clusters....*

Wonchon, Yuk Sa's ancestral home for over 300 years, now lies under water due to the construction of a hydroelectric dam. I had visited this area in my youth as my mother's hometown was the next village over. Tucked deep in the upper basin of the Nakdong river, this region had been the most important center for Confucian learnings since the 1500s, and steeped in Confucian heritage.

Yuk Sa belongs to the first generation of modern Korean poets. He was born in 1904 to a prominent literati family. As a child, he was educated by his grandfather in classical Chinese and literati painting before entering primary school. This was the darkest period of Korean history. Imperial Japan annexed Korea in 1910, and Yuk Sa's home region was renowned for its resistance to Japanese rule.

In 1924, Yuk Sa went to Tokyo to study literature, but returned to Korea 9 months later—perhaps to escape the anti-Korean sentiment that swept through Japan in the aftermath of the Tokyo earthquake of 1923. Yuk Sa's family by then had moved to Daegu where Yuk Sa became involved with a newly formed cultural/political organization. Its aim was to inspire youth with modern culture and native pride. In 1925, Yuk Sa left again, to study in Beijing. At that time, China was home to the Korean Temporary Government in Exile and Yuk Sa joined the Korean Independence Movement there.

Shortly after his return home in 1927, Yuk Sa was arrested by the Japanese police and falsely accused of being responsible for a mail bomb incident at Chosun Bank in Daegu. Japanese banks in Korea were engines of economic exploitation by the colonial government and therefore were targeted by the Korean Liberation army. The mail bomb was seen by a bank employee shortly before it went off, so damage was limited to a few minor injuries and some broken windows. However, Yuk Sa spent 19 months in prison before the real perpetrator was captured and he was cleared of the crime.

Soon after Yuk Sa's release from prison in January 1930 (Year of the Horse), his first poem "Horse" was published in the daily newspaper, Chosun Ilbo. In the poem, we see the image of a horse worn out by whips, like Yuk Sa's own body worn out by torture and

imprisonment. Yet the horse's spirit is intact. It is as if Yuk Sa wants the world and himself to know that his resolve is not shaken by his imprisonment.

In 1932, Yuk Sa went to China to attend the Academy of Korean Military Officers in Nanjing. Upon graduation in 1933, rather than joining his fellow soldiers in military action, he opted to return home to build an underground network to support the cause. By necessity, he had become a soldier, but by nature, he was a poet. As his poem "My Muse" testifies, he must have realized that he could no longer ignore the call to write. Nonetheless, Yuk Sa continued his political activities and was constantly pursued by the Japanese authorities.

His second imprisonment occurred a year after his return home from China when a former classmate gave the Japanese authorities the roster from the military academy. After his second release from prison in 1934, he began to sign his poems with the pen name Lee Yuk Sa. This was taken from his prison cell number, 264, which reads in Korean as "lee yuk sa."

Yuk Sa belonged to one of a few small literary circles dedicated to "new poetry." At the end of 1800, a "new literature movement" rose in response to modern western literature, as an impulse to modernize the nation. When Japan became the colonial power, this literary movement was one pillar of a liberation movement which also included military struggle. For a culture that was in crisis, developing a modern poetic voice was urgent. In his poetry, Yuk Sa voiced a defiant sorrow of the nation in ruin.

The following five years were Yuk Sa's most productive: In addition to poems, he published critical essays and a short story and was considered a leading literary critic of the time. Altogether, during his life, he was arrested a total of 17 times. Each arrest was followed by physical torture and imprisonment; he always left prison in poor health and needed months to recover. Despite this hardship, Yuk Sa managed to write 36 poems. His poetic tone is not militant, but rather, pensive and sensual. He writes introspectively about the precariousness of his itinerant life shaped by the forces of history. His poetry allows us to feel intimately how difficult it was to live through this turbulent period.

Yuk Sa died in the custody of the Japanese police in Beijing at the age of 39. The collection *Poetry of Yuk Sa* was published in 1946, two years after his death.

I am grateful for the encouragement and critical input of my fellow poets from the Lincoln Poetry Group and the Boston Literary Translators group. I thank Dolores Stewart and Lee Mendelhall for taking the time to proofread the manuscript and make invaluable suggestions. Lastly, I thank my family, especially my daughters, Pendry and Julia, for inspiring me to complete this project.

Sekyo Nam Haines (2017)

*Note: The biographical facts of Lee Yuk Sa are taken from Kim Hee Gon's *Newly Written Critical Biography of Lee Yuk Sa*, Published in 2000 by GiyoungSa.