What would you say to high school students as they prepare to read your book? Why did you feel it was important to publish this translation?

Growing up in South Korea, I was familiar with the figure and story of Hong Gildong since he was a universally beloved hero to kids, as much as Superman and Batman are to Americans. As a writer and a translator I wanted to introduce Korean literature to English readers, and I could not think of a better work than *The Story of Hong Gildong*. It is not only the most important work of fiction from pre-modern Korea but it is also an exciting and action-packed tale of a maverick adventurer who steals wealth from the greedy and punishes corrupt officials. So I think that even readers who are completely unfamiliar with Korean history and literature will find this work both educational and highly entertaining.

Could you suggest resources that would be helpful in understanding the role of this work in Korean culture?

For students, I think the most interesting and fun way to demonstrate the continued presence and importance of Hong Gildong in modern Korea is by showing them visual materials that are available on the internet. Recently, an article called ‘Hong Gildong is a Korean Superhero’ was posted on YOMYOMF (‘You Insult Me, You Insult My Family’ is a website for Asian-American pop culture) which shows wonderful vintage images of Hong Gildong, including a photograph from a silent movie version of his story from the 1930s, images from the 1960s comic book version, a link to a North Korean film from the 1980s, and pictures from a South Korean television show from 2008. [http://www.yomyomf.com/hong-gildong-is-a-korean-superhero/](http://www.yomyomf.com/hong-gildong-is-a-korean-superhero/)

The North Korean film is available in full on Youtube. It has English subtitles so students can see how the North Korean filmmakers used the basic story of the original work and injected communist ideas into it. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UVnXAuaFY_s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UVnXAuaFY_s)

A 1995 South Korean animated version is also available, a sequel to a film that was released in 1967. Unfortunately, the early version is not readily available, and this 1995 work has no English subtitles. But students who are fans of anime might find the art interesting. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ltov57POCYE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ltov57POCYE)

Students can also watch the 2008 South Korean TV drama ‘Hong Gildong the Hero’ (with English subtitles). This version is not historically accurate and departs significantly from the original story but students will find it fun for its modern pop sensibility. [https://www.dramafever.com/drama/320/1/Hong_Gil_Dong/](https://www.dramafever.com/drama/320/1/Hong_Gil_Dong/)
Is there an American equivalent to this work? What works of world literature would you compare this text to? Robin Hood seems to be a popular connection.

The historian Eric Hobsbawm wrote a wonderful book called *Bandits* in which he shows that the figure of the ‘noble robber’ like Robin Hood and Hong Gildong can be found virtually anywhere in the world. He gives many examples of such figures in America, Europe, Africa, and Asia. I think students would be greatly interested in finding out about them. The epic Chinese novel *Water Margin* tells the story of many such heroic outlaws in the context of Song dynasty China. In America, Western outlaws like Billy the Kid and Jesse James have been characterized as noble robbers but in the cases of actual historical figures like them one has to careful to distinguish between legends and historical facts (the Jesse James biographer T.J. Stiles, for instance, has shown that the figure was far from heroic).

After reading this text, what should students know about Korean culture? Would you suggest any further readings for students who love this book?

Students will learn not only about Korean literature but about Korea of the bygone era of Joseon dynasty. Modern Korea is, of course, a very different place from the one depicted in the novel. But even as they learn about life in the faraway country in a time that is long past, they will recognize familiar themes that are both universal and very much present in modern Korea—for instance, the desire for a just and fair world, the effort by an underdog to prove his worth, and the fulfillment of the ambitions of a talented person. For students who want to learn more about Korean history, the best place to begin would be the historian Kyung Moon Hwang’s concise book *A History of Korea*; and for those who want to read more traditional Korean literature of the fantastic variety, I recommend Ilyon’s *Samguk Yusa* (Stories from the Three Kingdoms, available in English translation), a collection of myths and legends from Ancient Korea.

Do you have any advice for students who hope to be published authors in the future? What were the best and worst aspects of your translating/writing process?

The entire task of translating a pre-modern Korean work into English was immensely difficult, given the fact that the two languages have no common history. I not only had to think in two such completely different languages, I also had to comprehend the mentality of a bygone era. Despite all the great difficulties I faced, I kept at it because I was fulfilling my desire to introduce literature from my home country to English readers, and because I was having a great deal of fun doing it. At the time, I had no idea if I would be able to publish the translation, and I certainly did not know that it would become a Penguin Classic! So my advice would be that it is okay to have ambitions and hope for success when translating or writing your own original work, but that should not be your main motivation. Regardless of talent, success may happen or it may not, so much of that is beyond one’s control. You should tackle a writing project because you feel it is important work and because you personally find it fulfilling. I am very happy that I managed to introduce this wonderful story to English readers, but my satisfaction comes from the feeling that I tried my very best in this project.

The Story of Hong Gildong

TRANSLATED WITH AN INTRODUCTION AND NOTES BY MINSOO KANG

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