

Mater 2-10 by Hwang Sok-yong review - a masterpiece of Korean history

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This epic political novel traces the country from Japanese occupation through partition, as experienced by a family of railway workers

A rusting, bullet-riddled locomotive in the demilitarised zone that slices through the Korean peninsula gives this marvellous epic novel its enigmatic title. Captured during the Korean war of the early 1950s, the immobilised train pointing North has become a famous symbol of the frustrated yearning for reunification, a “commemorative fossil of the age of division”. The train is an underlying motif within Hwang Sok-yong’s mature masterpiece, a worker’s-eye view of the 20th-century history surrounding Korea’s partition, which draws deeply on his personal experience of labour and pro-democracy movements and his five-year stint in prison for breaching South Korean security laws by visiting the North in 1989.

Originally published in Korean in 2020, Mater 2-10 opens in the 21st century with a laid-off factory worker, Yi Jino, staging a vertiginous “sit-in” on the catwalk round an industrial chimney. In a mountaineering tent overlooking railway tracks, his sky-high protest stretches beyond a year, while far below workers prostrate themselves in solidarity.

Two brothers dramatise the stark dilemma of occupation: collaborate or resist?

Jino’s lone vigil - a powerful metaphor for struggle against overwhelming forces, including globalisation - is interspersed with hallucinatory flashbacks to a century of Korean history, as witnessed by three generations of his family of railway workers. The focus is on the Japanese colonial period of 1910 to 1945, when Korea’s language was suppressed and its “slaves with no nation” forced to take Japanese names. The absorbing narrative shunts between grungy realism and what the author terms “mindam realism” - as the translators note, “halfway between folklore and plain talk”. The result is oral history spiced with legendary exploits and ghostly appearances by forced labourers.

The heartland of the underground labour movement is Yeongdeungpo, where the author grew up, a railway hub and industrial suburb of Seoul. Two brothers, Ilcheol and Icheol - Jino’s grandfather and great-uncle - dramatise the stark dilemma of occupation: collaborate or resist? Ilcheol is one of few Koreans to become a locomotive engineer, whereas his socialist younger brother joins the independence movement. Koreans, the rebel learns, are “bound in two heavy shackles”, being “doubly oppressed by Japan and capital”. Yet when Icheol tells their father Baekman, a lathe operator loyal to the imperial railways, “Those bastards own you, they’re your masters,” the quiescent Baekman objects: “It takes power to change the world.”

As activists plot sabotage and strikes over makgeolli liquor and steaming rice cakes, Japanese “thought police” and their Korean henchmen enact savage reprisals, in a cloak-and-dagger atmosphere of spies and provocateurs. Icheol’s cat-and-mouse pursuit by the police inspector

Yamashita - a childhood friend and Korean collaborator - is grippingly cinematic, as the action shifts between Korea and Japanese-occupied Manchuria.

Captured cell members strive to hold out for 24 hours, to enable those they will betray to flee ("As dawn broke, Wuchang broke, too"). The colonial logic of torture is brutally applied by fellow Koreans, from bamboo needles under fingernails to waterboarding. Nor are women spared, in a novel that restores them to an activist role, though "luck alone determined whether they started in a factory or a brothel".

The euphoria of liberation in 1945 proves short-lived. The day after Nagasaki was bombed, the USSR declared war on Japan, mounting a Red Army offensive in northern Korea "faster and more powerful even than their capture of Berlin". Yet, the novel contends, the US had already planned Korea's partition along the 38th parallel - wrecking food production and sundering families - as "a victorious US and a defeated Japan came together to confront their common enemy, the Soviet Union". In the US-backed South, no Koreans were invited to the exchange of flags, nor were Japanese war criminals tried. It was "really a handover of colonial rule". As the Japanese chief inspector says: "We lost, but Korea did not win." The cynical betrayal opens the eyes of both Baekman and Ilcheol.

Mater 2-10 is a vital reminder that, while the Berlin Wall may have fallen, the cold war lives on in a divided Korea. It traces the roots of postwar persecution of labour activists smeared as "commies". Decades of torture of political opponents in Japanese-built prisons are revealed as a "legacy of the Japanese Empire".

Hwang's aim, he writes, was to plug a gap in Korean fiction, which typically reduces industrial workers to "historical specks of dust". Not only does he breathe life into vivid protagonists, but the novel so inhabits their perspective that we share the shock and disbelief as their hard-won freedom is snatched away.

- Mater 2-10 by Hwang Sok-yong, translated by Sora Kim-Russell and Youngjae Josephine Bae, is published by Scribe (£16.99). To support the Guardian and Observer, order your copy at guardianbookshop.com. Delivery charges may apply.

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