An Interview With Gord Sellar
by Hong Insu

(A Korean translation of this interview appeared in the Korean SF "mook" magazine 미래경 (Futuroscope) *in Summer 2010.)*

1. What is 'SF' to you?

Hmm. You know, there's really quite a long history of people offering definitions of SF, and also of authors going ahead and writing texts that defy those definitions. A lot of the definitions seem to come more out of personal vision of what the genre ought to be. Sometimes -- like when Hugo Gernsback and John W. Campbell set out their definitions -- it has some influence on the practice of writing SF. But sometimes, prescriptive definitions are just maddening. I think Darko Suvin is brilliant, but he also excludes space opera from his definition of science fiction in no less a book than *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*! I do have some time for Gary Westfahl's definition of SF -- which he offers near the end of The Mechanics of Wonder: The Creation of the Idea of Science Fiction -- but only in an academic way. It's a sort of shell game, Westfahl says, and in SF there are three major traits: 1) it's prose narrative, 2) it participates in a scientific or technoscientific discourse, and 3) it describes stuff that doesn't exist now. But Westfahl notes, SF often involves only two of the three (and specific subgenres are built on which two any story incorporates). Westfahl also argues (for literary-critical reasons which make sense) that commentaries on SF, like book reviews and science articles in SF magazines, for example, should be included within the bounds of SF for critical purposes, for the same reason we recognize that if you're studying Ezra Pound, you might read his selected correspondence, his academic (or pseudo-academic) writings on Romance Language literature or prosody, or his bizarre *Guide to Kulchur*, and not *just* his poetry.

That's all academic, though. I'll tell you what SF is all about for me. Last summer, I was in Wyoming for Launch Pad, and Robert Sawyer pointed out the moons of Jupiter to me. Believe it or not, I'd never seen them before through a telescope -- even if I have written about them. And then I looked at Andromeda.
Andromeda.

The photons striking my retina had traveled, unobstructed, for two and a half million years, at the speed of light. They struck nothing until they set off that strange chemical reaction in my brain, as I gazed out into the starry sky. I was seeing across cosmic oceans of time, and I knew it. I said to Joe Haldeman, "I didn't know... I didn't know what I was looking at, all those years." And he patted me on the shoulder and told me, "Aw, you knew what you were looking at. You just didn't know the names."

That's what SF is about for me. It's about literature in a world where looking into the sky (or the genome, or some new technology) isn't just some romantic bit of imagery, or some kind of metaphor for meaningfulness, but a kind of confrontation with the universe we live in. It's about being being gloriously bowled over by the fact that reality will blow your mind everytime. And it's about likemindedness -- about standing in a field and

looking up into the sky with people like me. I think the fact that a house party was held for Ted Chiang when he visited Korea is perfectly right, because to me, SF is a kind of global house party of ideas, of goofing off, of entertainment that -- unlike most entertainment -- can actually be smart, and can make you smarter too.

Which isn't to idealize SF. It's also a ghettoized literature, and it seems to both exult in its own ghettoization, and sulk about it at the same time. We're too white, too American (I can say that even if I'm Canadian), too middle class. We're starting to look at the rest of the world, but only slowly, frustratingly. And a lot of SF simply hasn't figured out what to do with the Bush era. I was reading what the occasional blogger Rich Puchalsky wrote on the death of cyberpunk, and I think he put it well: Bush took a lead pipe and beat the ideology underlying cyberpunk -- the folk-belief expressed in texts like *Neuromancer* and *Schismatrix* and *Snow Crash* that yes, governments and corporations are big and bad and try to control people and societies (usually to the latter's peril), but they can't *really* do it, that this sort of oligopofascism they attempt isn't practicable anymore in the oh-so-postmodern exponential curve of technology, for which the street -- the marginals, the outsiders, the hackers -- find their own uses. Well, I hate to say it, but Puchallsky's right. BushCo kind of beat that ideology to death, or at least proved it wrong.

Which leaves SF in a kind of conundrum now, since a great deal of what has revivified SF in recent years has been the diffused influence of cyberpunk, and we're kind of permeated with this ideology. What is to be done? we ask, but we're not really used to answering the question in a modernist way -- in a way that has something to say about governments and the practical use of power, for example. And I'm sad to say a lot of SF authors -- especially the cyberpunks -- have retreated into history, or to present-day thrillers, or just stopped writing. A lot of the rest of us are just spraypainting the sky the color of television on a dead channel, and but calling it global warming. Calling it nuclear war again -- in films, there's been so many nuclear holocausts lately. Why those old nightmares, as the levels of the oceans are still rising yearly? We'd rather crouch in the familiar dystopian mud, I think, as a genre. And the longer we do, the closer we teeter towards irrelevance.

One last definition I've been kicking around for a long time, is that it's a kind of vaccine that gives us memetic antibodies for Future Shock -- yeah, Alvin Toffler's *Future Shock*. Toffler's specific predictions are almost all wrong -- our world looks very little like John Brunner's *Stand on Zanzibar* -- but Toffler's ideas were definitely a kind of template for thinking about the future, and I think he's right, in some ways, about the experience of future shock. SF is the literature that acknowledges the violent psychological and social impact of technological change. I believe it's the only literature that is deeply invested in ideas anymore, in the future, and in our fate as a species. That's not to say other literatures don't engage with important things: sure, they do. Identity is important. History is important. Love is important. But mainstream fiction often seems to deal best with the *familiar* aspects of these things, and fails to explore the unfamiliar. If you ask me, mainstream poetry and literature want nothing to do with the future... and when they do, they usually do it in ways that are inherently SFnal. (Margaret Atwood may pretend her most recent books aren't SF, but it's purely a question of branding and literary cachet.)

I had friends whose marriages had already crumbled because of online dating, long before the movie YOU'VE GOT MAIL was released, for example. At a Clarion West party last summer I met a woman who said she met her first husband online... in the 1970s (on an online campus BBS I think it was, via *telnet*!). She was, of course, an SF fan. Another singular example was when Dolly the Sheep got cloned. Remember that? All the non-SF people I knew were in a kind of existential panic -- in "Future Shock." But all the SF people I knew -- particularly the people into literary SF -- shrugged and said, "Huh, finally." They pointed out that clone armies wouldn't necessarily be sensible, useful, or even likely. They pointed out that cloning could have many good uses, as well as (just like any technology) a few negative ones. They expressed the hope that maybe this would lead to us growing replacement limbs and organs soon.

2. How did you start to write SF? Were there special 'inspirations' for you?

I have only really remembered this recently, but I started out writing fanfic, actually -- rewriting the plotline of the film *Ghostbusters* with my friends and myself in the starring roles. (I hadn't seen the film yet. When I did, I liked my version better.) At some point in late elementary school, I started playing traditional (ie. D&D-based) RPG games with my friends, and more fanfic -- about the games my friends and I played -- poured out of me. Those games taught me a lot about character, tension, plotting, and more, especially since I was usually the GM.

A friend got me into Lovecraft when I was tired of traditional swords & sorcery, and I guess Lovecraft led me finally to SF. He's weird -- very purple, very much about the language he's abusing, and very much about fear. Lovecraft figured fear was the oldest human emotion. Probably he's right, but that doesn't mean it's the most *interesting* one. I preferred wonder, and since I was breaking away from the Catholic church around that time -- after a whole childhood immersed in Catholic schools and church on Sundays -- I found SF in some ways provided a kind of enchantment premised upon science and the physical universe, on the nature of change, on the sensation not of fear, but of wonder. I'd been reading science popularizations alongside all kinds of crazy New Age books -- including Erich von Däniken, whom my father introduced to me when I questioned the existence of God in front of him. (Von Däniken's work is basically a crackpot "nonfiction" reworking of a French ripoff of the Cthulhu Mythos.) Anyway, over time I found the science books more compelling. It was natural for me to move towards SF, where the interesting issues in science were being dramatized.

The first SF novel I read as an adult was David Brin's *Earth*, which sent me straight to John Brunner's *Stand on Zanzibar*. Those were important books for me in many ways. A guy I knew online, Stefan Jones, sent me a book of Bruce Sterling short stories and Olaf Stapledon's beautiful, amazing novel *Star Maker*. (And also a lecture by Freeman Dyson he'd taped off NPR.) And there were two more authors who were really significant early on: Maureen McHugh, whose China Mountain Zhang slapped me in the face hard with what SF could do, and Greg Egan, whose work I accidentally started to replicate until a friend told me I was writing a Greg Egan novel. Then I got into Bruce Sterling and

Connie Willis, and bunches of other writers. But I think McHugh, Egan, Brunner, Stapledon, Brin, and Lovecraft were all formative for me.

But before all of that, I was writing poetry. Tons of horrible poetry, and the occasional good piece too. I don't write much of it, but I think I learned a lot from writing poetry, and especially from reading E.E. Cummings, William Carlos Williams, and Ezra Pound. SF poetry, not so much, though I do have a project or two I want to finish off someday, including a book of SF poetry woven into a prose narrative, a bit like Dante's *Vita Nova*, and an epic poem about what I think is the weirdest moment in recent world history, the Taiping Rebellion.

3. What is your main 'theme' as SF writer?

I'm not sure that I actually have any precise themes that run through my work. One individual pointed out a kind of recurrent fascination in my earliest publications with "positive terrorism" -- something clearly that does show up in "Dhuluma No More" as well as in a few other stories -- and that's not an accident. I am very concerned about the processes of power and resistance to power work in a world like ours, a world with our particular media, politics, and technology -- and headed in the directions those three strands of modern civilization seem to be going. This interest probably, more than anything, reflects my sense -- echoing and informed by HG Wells -- that the primary institutions in our world are often relatively stupid or hobbled, often poorly equipped to interface with reality as science describes it, and therefore may play a major role in our extinction. I'm interested in the ways people not only transgress and resist, but also fight back against such systems.

"Terrorism" is a word we hear used when non-Western people blow things up, but not when white people or "first world" people do. Terrorism is as evil as any other form of warfare, of course. But I'm not sure the conviction it's more evil isn't rooted in self-serving bigotry. There are scientists who argue that the monsoons of Africa failed in the 80s due to particulate matter emissions from European cars and industry. Millions died in the ensuring drought and famine. If something similar was knowingly perpetrated -- an act I don't believe is beyond the realm of possibility when business finally decides to cash in on the climate panic that would erupt as global warming begins to ramp up at a terrifying rate, just about any response by Africa and India would be understandable -- for people able to put themselves in the Africans' and Indians' shoes imaginatively, anyway. And what would it matter if we did or didn't understand?

(Which is one reason I always find it interesting how many readers think "Dhuluma No More" has a happy ending. If your sympathies lie with Ngunu and his people, and not with the white, developed, corporate Euro-Americans, then it's hard to read the story that way. Personally, my sympathies lie just enough with Ngunu to think the ending is a tragedy of sorts -- or that it's a valid reading, anyway, even if his plans *were* doomed as Illingsford claims.)

Another thing that can be observed in my fiction, though it's not really a "theme" exactly, is the exploration of voices that have too often been left out of our vision of the future. This is a trend, of course: more and more authors are writing stories about places outside the West, about characters who aren't white male middled-aged American men. Nalo Hopkinson, Paolo Bacigalupi, Geoff Ryman, Ian McDonald are good examples of people writing SF who are these days exploring the future from points of view rather non-Western, rather non-white, or, at least, they're trying to do so. I think that's good, this attempt to widen the embrace of SF, which is something we need to do. English language SF is too full of visions of a world of (or a world dominated by) white people, or -- even worse -- of an all-American galactic future. It's stupid, it's intellectually impoverishing -- not just to non-white reders, but to white readers as well -- to everyone. My response is that a lot of my characters come from places outside the Western, developed world, or from ignored and neglected (by SF) parts of the Western, developed world. I'm hoping not to get things too wrong when I write about a place like Korea... and if or when I do, I'm hoping that some Korean reading the story will stop and say, "Wait, I can do better than this chump did!" and go off and write some SF that expresses Korean concerns and perspective, and puts it out into the world -- hopefully in English, so more people can enjoy it and learn from it, too!

4. Although there are few translated Korean SF (but you can read Korean!), have you ever read Korean SF?

Ha, I can read Korean -- a little -- but it's very slow going, and very difficult for me. I'm not really good enough to read Korean fiction -- not yet anyway, though I am studying off-and-on. It's a question of time, and since my Korean is good enough to get around, to survive and to do some stuff, I kind of stopped studying as a function of having too much other stuff to do. Excuses, excuses, I know.

But I've been slowly working my way through some of the stories at the *Crossroads* archive, though, sadly, new publications there aren't getting translated anymore. It's a shame and a pity, because there's a sort of booming interest in "World SF" now. I was approached a few years ago by someone interested in putting together an anthology of Korean SF in English translation -- someone who's done it before in another country -- but I cannot seem to find anyone who's interested in translating Korean SF into English, and since my own skills in Korean aren't developed enough yet, it's a no-go for the moment. I'm still trying to find people who'd be interested in such a project, and would love if anyone interested in working with me would contact me. I'm eager to try bring some Korean SF into the world.

I have to say, the most interesting Korean SF story I've read so far was "Proxy War" (*Daerijeon*) by Djuna -- the novella. That might be because it's set in an area very close to where I happen to live, but it's also because I think the story pinpoints some very specific and important things in Korean society today, though in a funhouse-mirror sort of way -- things like the commodification of bodies, the sexual objectification of people -- and this theme, which finally is linked to both the Cold War ("Proxy War" invites twin echoes of internet proxies and the proxy war that was fought here from 1950-52) and to

the dictatorships that followed, with their likewise objectification of people -- sometimes sexual, sometimes in terms of labour power. There's just so much packed into that novella. I'm actually planning on writing a paper about it for some journal, if I can find the time.

Another text I'm hoping to read this summer is Kangfull's *26* 년, which I think could be considered SF, as it's a kind of alternate history or alternate present. This kind of book basically could not be published in Canada -- it'd be too risky, too provocative. It'd be seen as advocating assassination. (*The Death of the President*, the anti-Bush faux documentary, was a shock to me in much the same way, but it seemed far less mainstream to me than Kangfull.) Which is interesting: my students, looking at satirres of government in Western comedic media (or even dramatic depictions like The West Wing) say, "This kind of thing would be impossible in Korea." Yet is Kangfull in jail? Was he ordered to take *26* 년 offline? Nope. While it's true the film never got made, it's remarkable that the book is widely available and the comic is online at all. (And it's bizarre that *this* text would be left alone, while someone like "Minerva" would get in trouble for making prognostications about the economy.)

By the way, this reminds me: back when I was living in Jeonju, before I ever saw any SF books in Korean, I came to Korean SF through movies. I've seen just about every Korean SF film made -- except *Uju Gwoein Wangmagwi* -- and one of the first academic papers I started work on was about the problems of adapting a foreign genre (SF) to a new culture cinematically. Which is something I, argh, need to revise and send out soon!

5. What do you think about Korean SF?

I feel really frustrated that more of it isn't available in English translation, so I could make up my own mind about it. I have Korean SF writer friends who say to me things like, "Oh, there is no good Korean SF." I can't really believe that. And I'm dying to see what Koreans do with SF tropes and themes as they adapt it to the Korean cultural, political, and historical situation. I wish that more Korean SF fans felt more proud and arrogant about Korean SF: arrogant enough to be translating it into English -- not being daunted by the difficulties involved. I wish they wanted to spread it around the world the way people are trying to spread Korean pop music, or makgeolli, or any number of other aspects of Korean culture. Like I said -- I feel SF is a kind of global house party, where people are goofing off while talking about all kinds of ideas. I'd love to see Korean SF authors entering into that growing global conversation.

I also think that it's probably more translatable than some might imagine. I think it might be hard for *certain* works to find a mass audience outside of Korea. For example, *In Search of an Epitaph* by Bok Geo-il might not really be all too deeply comprehensible to someone who doesn't know Korean history. Then again, that's probably true for lots of mainstream Korean literature, and that gets translated anyway.

My suspicion is that most of the bilingual SF enthusiasts are more concerned with an understandably more pressing issue: the translation of canonical SF works into Korean

for the Korean audience. This is important work, something I want to study carefully if I have time this year or next -- and it's not like English literary circles didn't go through this frenetic canon-building process at some point, too. A century ago, academia in the English speaking world was building a canon of classical literature in English translation. (Before then, mainstream English literature wasn't even considered worth studying in universities, and reading classical literature -- Homer, Virgil, those guys -- was something you were supposed to do in the original ancient Greek and Latin.)

I can say a lot more about Korean SF cinema, but should preface my comments with this disclaimer: I find most SF film and TV shows disappointing. Adam Roberts has noted that SF has gone from a literature of ideas to a visual genre focused on spectacle. That's true of most "visual SF" but it's especially true of Korean SF films. Discounting plainly incompetent films -- where the SFnal element is just handled plain ridiculously, like in *Heaven's Soldiers (Cheon Gun)* and *The Resurrection of the Little Match Girl*, I find Korean SF tends to fall into one of two categories: what I call "minjok SF" (nationalist, authority-romanticizing, and often military or paramilitary in nature -- like *Natural City*, *Heaven's Soldiers*, or *2009: Lost Memories*), which I don't like, versus "minjung SF" (focused on the oppressed masses as exemplified in one rebel, authority-criticizing, and centered on everyday people)-- like *The Host* and *Save the Green Earth* which I prefer enormously.

Maybe my usage of *minjok* and *minjung* sound odd put this way -- I'm basing it on what I have read of Shin Chae'ho's formulation of the terms. In any case, I think the *minjung* strain is much more interesting, as well as much more transmissible to Western viewers. Our distrust of authorities is, I think, as deep as our sympathy for underdogs, and the melodrama of a good cop's life in a bad world will always resonate less strongly for me than the melodrama of an exploited factory worker fighting for his rights, or to save the Earth, or of the downtrodden modern peasant fighting against impossible odds for his family.

Also, Korea has produced some of the weirdest SF films ever. I have no idea what to say about Nam Ki-woong except... wow. I salute his insanity. I can't call his movies "good" but they are, at least, unlike anything ever I've seen.

6. Is there any SF work (novels, movies, etc.) which remind you 'Korea', as foreigner lives in Korea?

Ha, all the time. Strangely, I was reading The Lord of the Rings when I left Canada for Korea. It was the first time I'd read the book, and the first time I'd left Canada to live abroad. The book and my experience resonated -- not in Frodo's quest, but in the experience of constantly finding help from strangers along the way. Frodo had just gotten out of the Shire and run into Tom Bombadil, and here I was lost in the Incheon Airport, trying to find a bus to Jeonju, and some kindly *ajeoshi* stops, asks me where I'm going, and leads me to the right bus stop.

When I first arrived, on the last day of 2001, I compared Seoul to the urban landscape of the film Bladerunner: neon everywhere, gritty-yet-future-noir, lots of glass and steel and too much concrete. It's a common comparison for Westerners, but even Iksan City (in Jeollado) felt like SF back then, though: broadband was everywhere, and everyone had a cell phone. Back in Montreal, I'd had maybe two friends with cell phones, and one friend who had broadband internet at the time. I sometimes thought of a funny line in Iain M. Banks' Culture novel *The Player of Games* where a character leaves his communication unit (basically, his AI-powered cell phone, but I can't remember what they're called in Banks' universe) at home to meet with a spy drone-bot. The narrator observes that every bad story in The Culture begins when someone leaves his or her communicator unit at home. It was a line that came to mind often as I saw people everywhere walking around practically engaged in a cybernetic, symbiotic relationship with their cell phones. (And of course, now, I'm like that too.)

In another sense, I just finished reading Ian McDonald's *Cyberabad Days* and one story in particular, "Kyle Meets the River," speaks very powerfully to the experience of discovering a whole world full of people who don't look, think, or behave like oneself, and the awe and shock it can inspire to the newcomer. It's hardly like that for me as often now, but when I first got here, even though I expected to be in a place where things worked radically differently, the ways in which things differed -- the unanticipatability of those differences -- was a kind of shock to me sometimes.

Another book I mentioned above, Paul Park's *Celestis*, makes me think of Korea, too. It's got so many elements. It's a novel about a colony planet where the local aliens were "freed" by humans from the colonial oppression of another alien species; when the story begins, most of the elites in this alien society are trying really hard to be "humans" -- that is, mostly jettisoning their traditions and culture and way of thinking and being, and trying to become emulations of Earthlings. They take consciousness-altering drugs and get plastic surgery to appear more human-like, but also to think, to feel, and to be gendered in the way (implicitly Western) humans are. A man and his fiancée, one of the "female" aliens, suddenly experience a terrorist attack, and the "female" alien is cut off from the supply of drugs that make her human. She begins slowly to turn back into her original species form, which is roughly humanoid but cognitively utterly alien. The book of course explores gender, and what it's like to be human, but it also paints a vivid portrait of what it's like to be an alien from the inside of the alien's mind. It's an *amazing* book.

Don't get me wrong: I'm absolutely *not* claiming Koreans are like aliens to me, and in fact find Koreans have much more in common with the rest of the world than many Koreans seem to imagine; plenty of the things that people think are "uniquely Korean" and "untranslatable" (concepts like the sorrow of "han" and "jeong") are actually common and widespread in most cultures, including my own. But *Celestis* makes me think of Korea in a number of *other* ways -- in how it examines at a society that is feverishly jettisoning its own culture, history, and sensibility to try look like something else. (As I look around Seoul, wondering why all the historical buildings are being ripped down, I wonder why the government is so bent on erasing Korea's history from the landscape. Even unpleasant

history is formative, and needs to be digested and remembered.) It also reminds me of the constructedness of gender, something I find more apparent in cultures outside my own, but especially in Korea. The plastic surgery parallel doesn't need explanation, but the "cognition" one might: I do find that many younger people I meet here are eerily almost-Western, but not quite, in a lot of their sensibilities. It's quite fascinating, and explains why there is so much intergenerational strain here. The ambivalence about postcoloniality, distorted (and even erased) memories of the colonial past, and the conflicts in identity that arise from all of that strike a chord for me, too. And then, of course, there is the way it depicts a close and powerful relationship across lines of fundamental difference, and how frustrating but also ultimately how deeply interesting such encounters with an Other can be... especially since, after all, *I'm* the space alien here. (Which is, ultimately, one of the reasons I chose to come to Korean in the first place.)

Another novel which in some sense "feels" like Korea to me -- while being utterly unlike Korea in most tangible ways -- is John Brunner's masterpiece *Stand on Zanzibar*. I think it's just the constant, frenetic shifting of viewpoints. It really feels like the *bballi-bballi* experience of daily life and work in Seoul, the shocking sexism apparent in Brunner's future. I'm not sure Brunner's novel would translate well -- I wonder how one could render the rhythms, style, and jaded hipster lingo of the imaginary author Chad C. Mulligan's writings in Korean, for example -- but I would absolutely love to see a novel by a Korean author inspired by Brunner's approach in this novel.

I was also quite struck when I heard, quite a while ago, Miss Jeong So Yeon express a desire to translate some of the work of the late Thomas Disch. I've read a few of his novels and they feel something like what I get from reading books like Yang Kwija's *Wonmidong Saramdeul* (in English, *A Distant and Beautiful Place*) or Cho Sehui's *The Dwarf*. (In Korean, *Nanjangiga Soaolin Jageun Kong*.) There's that gritty, underbelly-of-the-future quality one finds in some of William Gibson, but with less of the plasticized Japan-adoration and less of the tidiness. People in Disch's future lose teeth and get breast cancer.

But I'll be honest: the longer I live here, and the more I study the history of modernization, the more parallels I find with the late Victorian era, and with the cataclysmic shift in culture and norms that happened around 1920 in America. If you compare the flapper girl and the *dwenjang nyeo*, you see eerie resonances in how these stereotypes are constructed in reference to male anxiety about changing roles for women, consumer and otherwise. If you look at the Silent Generation of the 1930s, and the generation of people entering the workforce i the wake of the 1997 financial crisis. The construction industry in Seoul today, and the London of H.G. Wells' boyhood (as he discusses somewhere in his autobiography.) The English dandy of Byron's day to the 꽃미남 of today.

There are other parallels, too, but, well, anyway. It's common for Westerners to negatively compare Korea to America in the 1950s, which is wrongheaded, of course. Korea's Korea, not some timewarped version of America. But Korea's also a society

going through a particular sort of modernization, a consumer-capitalist, technological, urban, technological modernity. It'd be surprising if there weren't weird resonances with how that played out in other places. It's weird. So many of the things Koreans take pains to explain to me -- like attitudes towards marriage, like the specifics of family relationships, like attitudes towards work and parents and children -- are always presented as decidedly *different* from Western values. And, well, of course they are, but it's only that simple if you completely decontextualize Western values, detach our current values from their intellectual and cultural history -- that is, if you ignore how we arrived at the current range that are normative in the West. I often say, "If the taboo on women smoking was a manifestation of Confucianism, then how come we had the same taboo in the West? And how come it seems to be coming apart now, just as it did in the 1920s, as female consumerism, female independence, and female power are being increasingly asserted in the public sphere?

Another great example is how young Koreans will tell me, "Well, I know it's normal for couples to live together before marriage in your culture, but..." Well, that "normal" is decontextualized. It was shocking for many people in my parents' generation. Shocking. And that, again, wasn't because of Confucianism. It seems to me Confucianism and the Christianity that underlies a lot of traditional social values in the West seem to have a lot of things in common -- the privileging of men (especially old, rich men of a particular racial or regional background), sexism, the silencing of children and women and the poor...

So anyway, I can say that a novel like Neal Stephenson's *The Diamond Age* with its neo-Victorians, or Connie Willis' *To Say Nothing of the Dog*, reminds me of a lot of social life in Korea somehow. Not directly, but in weird, echoic ways, as if the same philosophical ghosts that haunted England when it was modernizing culturally -- and which are, for some reason, of recurrent interest to Westerners -- are now also haunting Korea as Korean culture is continuing along its own road of modernization and postmodernization.

7. As an SF writer, please give some advice for would-be Korean SF writers.

Ha, what do I know?

Well, more seriously? The same advice that applies to all writers applies to you:

1. Don't expect to make a living at it.
2. Don't do it unless you actually love the process of writing itself.
3. Write like crazy.
4. Read like crazy.
5. Study writing and reading like crazy.
6. Repeat steps 3-6 until you are crazy. If you're lucky, you'll also be publishing soon enough. When you are being *paid money* to be crazy, then you will know you're really, truly a "science fiction writer."

Other thoughts that occur to me: if you can find a critique group, they're a big help. Are those popular in Korea? I haven't heard anyone mention one. But they're immensely helpful for learning how to write. In part because people point out where you're doing things wrong, but also, much more importantly, because you learn a lot by reading your peers' writing, picking out their missteps and flaws, thinking about how to make their stories work better. The Milford approach to critique is a great one, and is the approach I use in all of my writing classes. You can see people learning how to read critically, and then applying what they learn to their own writing, even over just a few months. It's especially good if you can find other SF authors who want to participate -- because the feedback you get from other SF-lovers will almost always be more useful than from non-SF people. Ask for brutally honest feedback, but establish a protocol for critique so that it's balanced. (Feedback should always include both what you're doing well, and what you could do better.) It hurts to have your weaknesses pointed out, and the first few times it can be hard, but you will get used to it, and also learn and improve. I find I learn as much from the careful reading and the task of formulating feedback as I do from the feedback I'm given -- and sometimes I learn more critiquing than I do from being critiqued.

Take a creative writing course, maybe? Remember, the teacher is not God. Neither are any of your classmates. But you can learn from them.

Network. Meet other writers, meet publishers, meet people who love SF as much as you do. After all, as an SF author in Korea, you've kind of got your work cut out for you: there isn't a big audience yet. It might be that part of what you need to do is actually go out and *create* that audience, the way people like Gernsback and Campbell did back in the old days in the USA. After all, SF was in a similar situation in the USA back in the 1920s, too. And even now, the American SF audience is tiny compared to the audience SF has in China! But in Korea, reading itself isn't a popular leisure activity: I remember a recent survey of 30 or so societies, in which Indians were the most avid readers... and Koreans read the least. (And a lot of book sales here are nonfiction, to make matters worse.) Which means, if you want readers, you're going to have to do more than just write. You're going to have to evangelize SF, but also try to popularize reading and books. You may also think about other genres you might get into: kids are playing games way more than they are reading books. Maybe you can get them interested in sophisticated narratives by working in games. Maybe if you publish some stuff, you can get connected and write film scripts so that Korean directors can start making better SF films? If you focus on media young people are interested in, maybe you can hook them, the way D&D tie-in books hooked me on fantastical narratives. Tobias Buckell writes tie-in novels for the game Halo, for example. I guess I'm saying, don't do like I've done so far. Don't accept the old model of writer, period, as necessarily the best one.

Don't expect to get rich. But you *can* build an audience. Building an audience is hard, but it is important.

This, again, isn't something that the English-speaking world neatly sidestepped. The earliest WorldCon, held in 1939 in New York City, was attended by only about 200

people -- not really much more than the number of people I seem to recall seeing at one Korean SF fan gathering hosted a few summers ago. But the difference is, WorldCon was written up in *Time* Magazine, and SF readers were already plentiful by 1939. What I'm saying is that Korean authors have their work cut out for them, but these challenges aren't unique, and you have a lot more resources available to you for free: maybe you can try podcasting. Maybe collaborating with artists in webcomics.

Trying podcasting Korean stories -- with permission, of course -- and see if you can get new readers or fans that way. Hold public readings, hold fun events that involve no long speeches, but all kinds of action and interaction and neat shiny stuff. Break the mold. Hold a national SF Con and **try to make sure there is no speech over 2 minutes long during the whole weekend**. (Have panels with writers in dialog instead!) Have a costume ball. Put writers together who you know will argue in colorful ways. Hold the convention near a bar, and make sure the writers and fans all go to the bar and get drunk and geek out together. Advertise it. Invite people -- the most ardent and knowledgeable fans, authors, critics, scientists. Heck, even foreign SF folks -- there's a small but eager number of us here, and we'd love to attend such an event. There are even more published or soon-to-be-published SF authors in-country now than there were a few months ago, including at least one other pro SF author besides myself. So reach out to people. Your most serious problem, as far as I can tell, is too few Koreans in general are interested in SF. Too few of them feel SF is relevant to their lives -- ironically, since SF is what spawned so much of modern thought and attitudes in Korea, and inspired, of all things, the cell phone and subway train. The lack of interest in SF is arguably not just a market problem, it's arguably a social problem, because SF does play an important role in the imagination of a society, in its adaptability to technical and scientific change, and more.

And I think you should be aggressively working to broaden your audience. Translating your stories and putting them out into the global SF marketplace, and also writing them conscious of the fact that they might be translated -- writing stories that to some degree *can* be translated -- might help. Or even working in English, if your English is really good. For example, Aliette de Bodard's first language isn't English, but she's "a rising star of SF" in the English-speaking world these days, and with good reason.

But if you plan on doing this, you should also keep up as much as you can with what's going on in SF globally. I've heard several times comments that Chinese SF that it is basically reinventing the wheel -- going through all the stages Western, specifically American, SF went through thirty to fifty years earlier. While this might be a natural part of the process of adapting SF to a culture, it also is likely to seriously limit interest of readers outside the culture you're writing for. To be on top of what's going on, read new SF, read magazines -- webzines and print magazines alike. Subscribe to English-language SF podcasts. Try to get to a WorldCon sometime. (I was dismayed to meet not a single Korean SF fan at the WorldCon in Yokohama a few years ago. So near... yet so far!) If you can, when you get to cons, network with SF pros. They're mostly a friendly bunch. Talk to editors, talk to fans, talk to whoever... make connections between the Korean SF crowd and their cousins all over the world.

And while I'm being grandiose: why not cultivate a little arrogance for yourself about the importance of SF? You're inoculating your society against Tofflerian Future Shock! If you're working in translation, you're importing or exporting valuable psychological and philosopchical skills and commodities! You're not just an entertainer -- but, *don't* forget to be entertaining, whatever else you take it upon yourself to do. People are paying to watch the circus of your imagination, not to be lectured.

Oh, and one more thing: read all over the map. I mean that geographically, but also in terms of genre. I can't speak for the Korean original myself, having only read him in translation, but I suspect there are all kinds of things for a fledgling Korean SF author to learn from, say, Yi Sang, or from major contemporary, non-SF authors (Korean or otherwise). Immerse yourself in the best nonfiction, too. The more widely you read, the more of a polymath you make yourself, the wiser and saner and more stunning your fiction is likely to be. Readings in history I especially recommend -- especially the histories of civilizations other than your own. My recent readings about history lately have opened up a whole new, fascinatingly weird old world that I knew was there, but never saw so clearly before.

8. What is your current work?

I'm working on a few short things: one related to HG Wells and alien STDs; another that is a kind of post-Singulatarian story of the politics and economics of computational justice (ie. a war between different AIs different models of ethics with concern to distribution of computation as a "natural resource"); and a story about the collapse of the Cap and Trade system and popular anger at Wall Street, told from the point of view of someone who's not what he appears. I also am slowly researching a couple of longer projects -- novels -- but I haven't the time to write them right now, due to academic responsibilities.

I'm also working on some academic stuff -- papers on things like the uses of SF film in TEFL classroms, the paper I mentioned above about Djuna's novella (and maybe *2009: Llost Memories*), and some other Korean SF stuff. I'm very interested in what I might call the "Asian Mystique" that surrounds Ted Chiang's reputation in Korea, and about the process of building an SF canon in translation that is going on here. I even have this weird psychology study I want to try do, concerning SF fandom, SF narratives, and inborn temperament. But I'm almost thinking that last one would make a good PhD thesis. I'm not sure I'm quite crazy enough to do a PhD, however.

9. Please recommend several SF for Korean readers.

Well, I'm assuming that SF in Korea's a bit like it was in America sixty years ago -- I'm guessing it's not crazy to assume most serious SF fans have read most of what's available in Korean translation, or at least most of what appeals to them that's available in Korean. (I sort of try to keep track of what's available in shops, and it seems a lot of great stuff is available now. All that Olaf Stapledon that's become available in what seems like the past year -- that's wonderful!) I'm going to point at things that I wish would get translated and

be made available to Koreans, stuff I think might be of particular interest to readers in Korea for some reason.

Here are some books I wish I could talk about with my Korean SF-fan friends. The kind of books I would be shoving into the hands of Korean SF translators if they asked me for something interesting to check out -- though, ha, they have their own interests. Anyway:

- Ian McDonald's *River of Gods*, and the follow-up short story collection *Cyberabad Days*, not only because of the strange sense I get that India is to Korean SF as Japan is to American SF -- that estranging, bewitching world of Otherness. But also because I'd love to get into discussions of representation, appropriation, and the racial issues in SF. The English-speaking SF world is shaking up these days about these issues, and I'm curious what Korean SF fans have to say about it. I'd be curious to see what the Korean response to Paolo Bacigalupi's work is like, too--he's definitely one of those Westerners trying to depict the world outside the west, and there are risks and benefits there. He was, until last year, only a short story author, but now he's got a novel out--*The Wind-Up Girl*. I'll admit I've not read it yet, but I am dying to. This summer, I hope. Oh, and Geoff Ryman's novel *Air*. Great, great novel.
- *Maureen McHugh's China Mountain Zhang*, and her short stories, especially those collected in Mothers and Other Monsters (which is available online for free... in English!) That novel is truly one of my favorites and just like couples who have just had a baby think everyone else should have babies too, I want to make all my friends read it. It's *that* good.
- Charlie Stross. Charlie Stross. Charlie &#@^#$! Stross. Seriously, he is a major figure in English-language SF now, and as far as I know nothing (or nearly nothing) of his is represented in Korean SF. I personally love the book *Accelerando*--it's one of my favorites of the last decade--but I suspect something more crowd-pleasing and accessible might be a better place to start translating his work. *Saturn's Children*, maybe, or the Laundry books with their Lovecraftian thriller funniness. Or *The Glasshouse*, which by the way I think has things to say about gender and power that are particularly pertinent in Korea.
- More of Bruce Sterling, especially his masterpiece *Holy Fire* and the novel *Distraction*, which I think might suggest some imaginative insight into the political situation here in Korea. *Schismatrix* is a great novel, but it's only one. Short stories, too -- the stories in *Globalhead* and *Crystal Express* are wonderful, and most of *A Good Old-Fashioned Future* is wonderful too.
- Paul Park's *Celestis* is not an easy book, but it blew my mind, and I wonder whether its postcolonial resonances would register well in Korea. I think they would. A number of his shorter stories, too. I haven't read his more recent series--it's fantasy--but it might also be interesting, if translated well. It's sort of a Narnia-for-grownups where the world on the other side of the magic door is, well, an alternate history, and Romania is a superpower.
- This might be controversial, but... Greg Egan? Personally, and I mean no offense to *Quarantine* wasn't the best book to start with. I'm thinking about *Schild's Ladder* and *Diaspora*, oh and *Teranesia*, which is a very accessible book, for

Egan. (I love *Distraction*, as well, but it's a bit like *Quarantine* and should probably be close to the last on the list.) And in the meantime, his short stories... he has so many great short stories. And short stories are the heart and soul of SF in many ways. They're the mad scientist's laboratory, and very important. Aspiring writers need brilliant exemplars of short fiction.

- Great huge gobs of short stories! The year's best anthologies, and other anthologies of original stories, are probably the best resource out there. Magazines like *Asimov's SF, F&SF,* and *Analog* are still important, of course--and *Interzone* is putting out a lot of great stuff too--but my impression is that, if you're reading in a foreign language, you will probably want to focus on the really top-notch stuff, so it's easier to check out the various year's best anthology editors and see whose tastes fit with yours. They can filter the best stories out everything published each year, and package it into a single book for you. There's been a kind of algal blooming going on in the world of short fiction anthologies. Jonathan Strahan's doing very interesting things with the *Eclipse* books, and other collections like *The Starry Rift*. But it's also worth keeping an eye on webzines like *Clarkesworld, Fantasy Magazine, Apex Online, Strange Horizons,* and *Beyond Ceaseless Skies*. So much stuff online, for free, and a number of these sites have a particularly different editorial taste -- they like stuff less likely to show up in the mainstream SF and fantasy magazines. Lavie Tidhar's *The Apex Book of World SF* also deserves a look, I think: I have a fond dream of Korean SFdom networking not just with English-language SFdom, but also with SF authors and fans in all those other places where, like in Korea, SF remains more marginal and grassroots.
- Minsoo Kang, a Korean expat and writer now teaching history in the US, is also a fine fantasy author and his *Of Tales and Enigmas* deserves more attention in Korea, not the least for the in-between way he reframes aspects of Korean culture and history -- with the knowledge of an insider -- but as an exemplar for how someone who knows both cultures presents Korean cultural setting and detail so that non-Koreans will understand it.
- This is also a bit personal, but I am on a Patricia Anthony kick right now, and find myself wishing that something by her--maybe the darkly moving short novel *Brother Termite*--would get translated. Anthony's kind of disappeared from the SF scene, but she was really, really good: both literary and very humane, but also committed to the truly strange consequences of her stories' assumptions. Which reminds me: is James Tiptree Jr.'s work available in Korean? It should be! That's another author I want to read more of myself.
- Iain M. Banks--I am surprised that there aren't more Culture books in translation. He's so interesting, especially certain Culture novels. Ken McLeod is great too, but I'm not sure how much appeal he'd have in Korea. Talk about radically different politics. I found his first *Star Fraction* novel a difficult read, but very rewarding. No offense to Scalzi and Heinlein fans, but I like meatier, crunchier politics in the fiction I read. McLeod really cracks apart the world we live in now, and makes you look at questions of politics in another way. And not just some goofy Ayn Rand way. I think he's one of the few writers now who is interested in the idea of utopia as a political problem or puzzle to be dissected and mounted on

a board, its innards displayed. I'm not calling him some fanciful utopian, mind you. I mean, he's interested in the question of practical construction of radically other political and social systems, for the purposes of thought experiment. Also, because the "femininist" philosophy some of the characters espouse (or pretend to espouse) recalls some anti-feminist discussions I've had here in recent years. I really do need to get my hands on the rest of those books.

- More of the non-SF commentary on SF--not just academic books, the lit-crit stuff, but also the non-fictional writings of SF authors. I mean, are *Trillion Year Spree* or Disch's *The Dreams Our Stuff is Made Of* available in Korean translation? Or even a book like Bruce Sterling's Tomorrow, Now, or his book on design; or Cory Doctorow's book on copyright? Gary Westfahl has made a sensible argument that the nonfiction writing of SF authors is often also a form of SF, in its speculative dimension, and for very sensible reasons: my grasp on SF's ideological and philosophical underpinnings, and its history, has grown immeasurably by looking at the "nonfiction" cranked out by writers like Sterling, Aldiss, even (or, rather, *especially*) H.G. Wells. That said, I have a copy of Isaac Asimov's *The Planet That Wasn't*, one of many collections of nonfiction (mostly science) essays he published in, I think it F&SF back in the old days. That stuff is untranslatable, really -- there's no market, and it's all out of date. But if you're very serious about understanding the peculiarities of the "discourse" of science in SF, looking at stuff like that, at editorials in old copies of SF magazines, is useful and important. Luckily, a few academics have been doing that work. Westfahl's one of them.

But that's all a very personal list. If you'd asked me for a similar list a year ago, some would be the same and some would be radically different. There's so much great SF out there--including very interesting regions I haven't even gotten close to exploring. I'm a slow reader, and somewhat idiosyncratic. A professor where I work is also a big SF fan, and I imagine *his* list would be radically different from mine. So would the list of most of my SF-loving friends. So don't take my list as anything but a list of things I wish I could gab more about with Korean SF fans. I've never been much into Zelazny--nothing against him, I've just never explore him much--and one can only talk about Ted Chiang's work for so long, right?

Ha, and now I'm wishing I could solicit a list of the "best Korean SF" stories from you and other readers in return. That's the problem with an interview by email. It's not so much a dialog, and puts me on a kind of pedestal. Who am I? Sure, I write stories, I teach about SF: but I'm just one of SF's lovers, like anyone reading this. So I'd prefer dialog. Back to that house party metaphor.