

Praise for *Korean Teachers*

This novel tells the story of how people who meet with good intentions come to hurt one another, how language schools are making use of the Korean wave to run a business, and how these schools are mobilising highly educated women using low wages to run the business. This novel makes you question whether women, including highly educated women, are still being hindered from trying to make something of themselves in society.

Kang Young-suk, author of *Rina*

Korean Teachers is a novel that clearly shows how specificity and realism make a good story. By realistically depicting the actual operations of a Korean language school for foreigners, the writer expands the functional space of a language school into a problematic space muddled with various social issues. In clear, readable prose, the novel shows how four female lecturers are hired for a short period, evaluated, and easily replaced, like consumer goods, and through this, how women can be easily reduced to the underdog—regardless of their education, occupation, class, or nationality.

Pyun Hye-young, author of
The Hole and City of Ash and Red

KOREAN TEACHERS

코리아안 티처

Seo Su-Jin

Translated by Elizabeth Buehler

I was pleased to meet diverse female characters in *Korean Teachers*. The writer doesn't take sides with or condemn her characters, and she simply presents their circumstances and helps the readers to understand her characters...I found the chapter on the future tense of Korean language especially thought-provoking. The future can only be speculated; it cannot exist as fact. We can therefore dream of the future by speaking about it. We can say we'll do something, and then inch our way towards our destination. Novels have endings, but for us, the ending is simply what comes next.

Choi Jin-young, author of *To the Warm Horizon*



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Spring Semester

Spring Semester

Three days before the spring semester began, Seon-yi found herself ascending the campus hill. It was quite steep, so her breathing quickly grew rough. Snowflakes stuck to her flushed face before disappearing. She raised her head and looked at the grey sky, powdery snow scattering across it, before briefly considering whether she should remove her coat and drape it over her arm. She was worried it would get wet. It was an 800,000-won handmade camel-coloured coat she had bought the day before, after receiving the text that she had been hired at the language school. She bought it even though she had no reason to wear it in the classroom. When she walked around the campus, though, she wanted to show that she was a lecturer, not a student.

Seon-yi had thought of getting a type of coat that university students would never wear. How did the lecturers dress when I was a university student? she'd asked herself. As she searched her memory, it was difficult to specify what her lecturers had worn. Back then, Seon-yi didn't know the difference between lecturers and professors. She followed young lecturers around who didn't have their own offices and respectfully called them 'professor'. "Professor, could you please slightly extend the submission deadline for the assignment?" she begged, and sent emails with the subject, 'Professor, I request a grade change'. Maybe Seon-yi's students would call her professor too. She felt something stir in her heart as she tucked her neat blouse into her black H-line skirt.

As she looked around the women's clothing store on the third floor of the department store, she kept thinking about the young-casual store beneath her feet on the second floor. As recently as a month ago, she'd bought a hoodie and a pair of ripped jeans from the young-casual store. She felt like she'd forged ahead in life, as if ridden the escalator to the next floor. Seon-yi had spent a long time working part-time jobs and suffering from mysterious stomachaches. She carried painkillers with her everywhere she went, and when she saw herself reflected in a glass window walking down the street, she was surprised by the scowling face that met her. But now her stomach no longer hurt and she stopped frowning habitually. She strode up the campus hill.

The snowflakes grew heavier. It seemed like if she opened her mouth wide, she could swallow a few of them. Without pausing her steps, Seon-yi extended her hand and when cold snowflakes landed on her palm, she repeatedly rubbed it with her other hand. Don't worry about the snow, she thought to herself.

The time to worry about the dry cleaning bills for her coat had passed.

Seon-yi smoothed her soft coat and tightened her belt, made of the same material as the coat.

That day was spring semester orientation for new lecturers at H University's Korean language school.

H University's language school was modest in comparison to the university's reputation, but its new director—appointed last year—had declared that by next year the school would be one of the four biggest in the country. For the spring semester, he'd attracted more than two hundred students from Vietnam and quickly hired lecturers to teach them.

The director, modest in height and wearing a khaki-coloured wool jacket, entered the classroom where orientation was being held. He'd sat in front of Seon-yi during her interview, so she recognised him right away. His thick eyebrows were the first thing she noticed about his face, which had a prominent jaw. The director walked quickly to the lecturer's desk and stood before it. A long-haired woman sitting in front of Seon-yi rose to greet him. Seon-yi got out of her chair as well and lowered her head in a bow as all the other lecturers stood up.

A pale-faced woman followed behind the director—Seon-yi had seen her at the interview. The woman, who asked very direct questions at the interview, had a soft face that somehow looked tired. From behind the desk with the school logo imprinted on it, the director instructed the new lecturers to take their seats with a hand gesture, and the pale-faced woman sat down at the very front desk.

There were twenty-two new lecturers in total. The director said there were 217 new students from Vietnam this semester.

“It’s now Vietnam.”

The long hair of the woman seated in front of Seon-yi jiggled as she opened her bag and pulled out a notebook. Seon-yi and the other lecturers took out their notebooks one by one and started to write down what the director was saying.

It’s now Vietnam.

According to what the director was confidently saying, Chinese students—who were previously the main clientele of the language school—had decreased more than half over the past decade. China today wasn’t the China of ten years ago, and with its surprising economic development and increasing efforts to be culturally independent, the influence of the Korean wave was no longer as strong as it had once been. When the THAAD controversy ramped up last year, many students from China had withdrawn their applications. Some had asked for refunds in the middle of the semester. The reason was they had been told to go home. The director said an issue like that was bound to repeat itself.

“We need to cultivate a new market.”

The director walked next to the lecturer’s desk and looked at the new lecturers, his arms crossed.

“We need initiative. We can’t just sit and wait. That kind of attitude will lead to crisis.”

The director paced left and right on the podium, as if he couldn’t be still for even a moment. Seon-yi, too, diligently moved her pen.

Korean language school at the point of crisis

The director had taken the initiative and gone to Vietnam himself, getting in touch with study abroad programmes there. Korea was very popular in Vietnam. People were still talking about the Daejanggeum drama. Samsung was unbelievably well-liked. Everyone wanted to come to Korea as well as learn Korean. The only unfortunate thing was the number of visas that could be issued was limited.

“The students are waiting in line.”

Last semester, thirty-four students had come as part of a pilot programme. This semester there were 217, and next semester one hundred more were expected. As the students were enrolled as and when they were issued visas, the enrolment of the 217 happened in a hurry right before the semester started. The plan for the next semester was to add another one hundred students, but it could end up more than that. The director said once again that the Vietnamese students were waiting in line.

“One student sold her house in order to come here. Her whole family supports her. I’m asking you all for your attentiveness.”

As the director walked busily left and right on the podium, he continued to raise his voice. When Seon-yi, following the director’s movements with her eyes, met his gaze, she quickly lowered her head. She grabbed her pen and started writing something so it wouldn’t look like she was avoiding his gaze.

When the director left, the pale-faced woman who came in with him turned her desk around and sat facing the new lecturers. Turning the desk around seemed to take her a lot of effort.

“As you’ve heard from the director, many Vietnamese students have enrolled, which is why we’ve hired so many new lecturers. You’ll be teaching the special classes for Vietnamese students. Oh, I’m Lee Han-hee, the lecturer-in-charge of Level One classes for Vietnamese students.”

Han-hee didn't say anything particularly interesting. Her hair hung at her shoulders and her makeup-free face looked hollow. Her pale wrists looked thin coming out of her olive turtleneck sweater.

"Today I'll give you your class schedule. They are divided into Monday-Wednesday-Friday and Tuesday-Thursday. The main teachers work on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, and the assistant teachers on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Main teachers, please pay special attention to attendance and reenrolment."

As she spoke, Han-hee pulled a stack of paper out of a shopping bag next to the desk.

"All information management will go through an online portal. Attendance records, exams, assignments, and presentation grades will be updated on the portal every day. The most important thing is attendance. If the student doesn't attend at least eighty percent of the classes, he or she can't advance to the next level, and if attendance dips below seventy percent, they may have problems with visa extension, so you have to always check attendance."

Seon-yi moved her pen busily so she wouldn't miss a single thing.

Meetings every Monday at two p.m., lecturers at other universities invited to attend.

Midterm exam in week five, final exam in week ten. Course evaluations the day after final exam.

Student reenrolment survey in week six, lecturer availability survey for future semesters in week nine.

After she said all that, Han-hee lifted her head and looked at the new lecturers. Her dark brown eyes met Seon-yi's for a

moment. Her eyes without double eyelids and her dark eyebrows wiggled.

"The reality is we don't know how long this will last as the number of new students has increased so quickly. As the director said, more new students are expected next semester, but in the summer semester the number of students typically goes down."

Han-hee briefly stopped talking. She tapped the desk with her index and middle fingers. Tap, tap, tap, like she was getting into rhythm.

"I'm telling you this beforehand just in case, but it may be difficult to provide you with classes next semester. I hope you understand."

No one responded, but Seon-yi felt the air subtly change. So she might be working there for only a semester? A semester at a language school was only ten weeks. Seon-yi put down her pen and placed her hand in her pocket.

"I'm just telling you this as the worst-case scenario. If there are no major problems, you'll keep getting classes to teach. That's how it's always been until now. Although it's a special case this semester, with so many newly hired lecturers... Like the director said, the prospects with Vietnam are bright. First, please check your class schedule."

Han-hee got up and walked between the desks, handing out the class schedules one by one. Seon-yi had many questions she wanted to ask, but she knew none of them were questions she *should* ask.

Seon-yi found her name on the class schedule.

The last special class for Vietnamese students: 1K—Mondays, Wednesdays, Fridays. She was the main teacher.

Did teaching three days a week rather than two mean she

had a better chance of a contract extension? Seon-yi looked at the notes she'd scrawled in her notebook. Main teachers should pay attention to attendance and reenrolment. It would be better for her if she made efforts with her students, ensured they attended class, and made them enrol again—right?

The long-haired woman seated in front of Seon-yi turned around and looked around the classroom.

“Ms. Kim Seon-yi?” she called out.

She was the first to get up and greet the director when he walked in. She had a tan face, large eyes, and thick, long eyelashes. Her hair and eyes were both a glossy black.

Seon-yi raised her right hand.

“I'm Kim Seon-yi.”

“Oh, hello. I'm your teaching partner, Kang Yi-seul.”

“Hello.”

Seon-yi bowed her head again.

“So you're the main teacher. I look forward to working together.”

Kang Yi-seul smiled and held out her phone. Her large eyes were curved like a crescent moon.

After the orientation, Seon-yi stopped by the administration office to borrow the textbooks as Han-hee had instructed. She joined a group of new lecturers stepping into the elevator, textbooks in their hands.

“Would you all like to get tea if you have time?” Seon-yi's teaching partner Yi-seul asked.

Two lecturers said yes, and Seon-yi, too, quickly agreed. It wasn't just because Yi-seul was her teaching partner that she'd agreed to join—she had a hunch that if she missed the first gathering, she would end up eating lunch alone in the future or be left out of the loop when meetings were postponed. It

was a survival strategy she'd learned from attending a girls' middle school, girls' high school, and girls' university: join a group on the first day. If you didn't belong, you would be excluded.