

NATIONALISM AND AGRARIAN POPULISM IN
MODERN KOREAN LITERATURE—
THE COLONIAL LEGACY

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In this essay, I have chosen to look at general trends over a period of about forty years in the modern literature of Korea. In the first half I put forth my broad and somewhat speculative impressions of the directions literary productions took, the relation to Japanese literature, and the importance of the colonial context. In the second half I have tried to give a few concrete examples from the lives and works of representative writers, but my purpose has not been so much to prove as to explore areas for further study.

I conclude that despite the existence and activity of literary movements that seem inspired by Japanese and Western models, modern Korean literature emerged from colonialism with a strong nationalist and rural character. Nationalism and populism were certainly conscious movements in the intellectual and political life of this period, but they were not specifically articulated as directions in which literature should go. Nevertheless, they stand out as the most important characteristics of the modern literature of Korea.

No one questions the considerable and direct impact of Japan and Japanese literature on the modern literature of Korea. There are obvious reasons for the initial and continuing strength of the impact. Koreans studying in Japan beginning with the first official group sent early in the Meiji period could see for themselves the apparently successful Japanese response to the threat from the West, which from the early 1870s included considerable interest not only in military and industrial technology, but in many other aspects of western culture and society. Koreans were aware of early efforts by Japanese interested in social reform to use the newly discovered novel form, often serialized in the new newspapers, to reach a mass audience, to propagate ideas and attitudes that they felt Korea also ought to be exposed to. Newspapers and modern schools were established in Korea in the 1880s with similar results to Japan—a western-educated elite inspired by western political and social ethics gradually emerged. The rapidly increasing direct influence Japan began to have on Korean internal affairs from the time of the Sino-Japanese War, leading to the establishment of Korea as a protectorate in 1905, and outright annexation in 1910, made Japan almost the sole mediator of outside influence on Korea. The educational system set up by the Japanese colonial governors provided a Japanese curriculum including the study of Japanese language and literature, and over the years of colonial rule, Korean students became increasingly able to read and be influenced by literature that was being produced in Japan. The lack of adequate facilities for higher education in Korea forced increasing numbers of Korean students to go to Japan to study in (mostly private) universities where they became more fluent in Japanese than was possible in Korea and were exposed to a much broader spectrum of new ideas than was possible in the more strictly controlled educational environ-

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ment of Korea. Young literary minded Koreans, studying in Japan, followed the trends and changes in literary style and theory, and many of them began, while still in Japan, to set about creating a comparable modern literature for Korea.

Superficially, modern Korean literature seems to have followed a path very similar to that of modern Japanese literature. As in Japan, the first step was to decide upon a modern, colloquial style, though this was a somewhat different problem and process than in Japan due to the greater strength in Korea of the elite classical Chinese tradition and the therefore greater distance—gulf in fact—between formal and colloquial language. And once it was determined that modern literature would build on the purely Korean colloquial tradition, the association of the colloquial language and the Korean script (*hangŭl*) with the non-elite native folk tradition assured that Korean literature would be more popular in character and broader in its appeal than Japanese literature tended to be.

But as in Japan, the first experimental attempts in modern colloquial fiction were closely related to journalism and the appearance of mass circulation newspapers. Early journalism in Korea, even in its cultural offerings, was invariably political—conceived as a vehicle for building a national consensus, primarily on the issue of modernization. Overt nationalism and the desire for independence could not easily be expressed under the strict censorship of the Japanese colonial government. And in any case it seems that for most writers of this fiction, these covert goals were considered impossible to achieve without first achieving modernization. This way of thinking corresponded perfectly to the stated reasons for Japan taking Korea over. These writers had been psychologically colonized to the point where they valued modernization more than independence. Or rather, they stood outside their own culture and judged it lacking in the values that they had individually internalized. Thus they were vulnerable to the specious colonial logic that Korea wasn't ready to be independent. They did, however, hope for independence after modernization and education of the people could be achieved. And since the Japanese had no such hopes—a fact which the earliest generations of educated Koreans didn't tend to recognize, but which later generations could not help but recognize—the idea of modernization began to change. The early proponents of modernization focused on material change and also showed some interest in institutional change and social change. They admired the material culture of the west, style no less than technology, and as in Japan in the early stages of the importation of western culture, the important and the trivial were lumped together under the broad rubric of enlightenment. "Enlightenment sticks" were western-style canes; "enlightenment purses" were western-style pockets. In fact, enlightenment (*kyemong*) was a word that completely confused the issues of westernization and modernization and encouraged an attitude of contempt for anything traditional. The problem which enlightenment presented to traditional culture and the sense of self (identity) was solved differently in Japan and Korea. In Japan, relatively early on, the appeal of enlightenment stopped just short of enlightenment thought, at least in terms of official policy. And because it was official policy that determined, among other things, the educational curriculum, enlightenment thought could be held in reasonable check, and traditional social organization and values could be maintained. In Korea, however, social organization began to crumble with colonialism. Traditional class distinctions became blurred as success became identified with collaboration and as the inferior status of all Koreans was institutionalized. The family system and the traditional roles of men and women underwent devastating changes as seems to happen in all colonial and

semicolonial situations. Men lost their authority as they lost their social/public effectiveness. Tradition was not available to Koreans in the way it was to Japanese. Also, because enlightenment was not Japanese—and it was Japan and Japanese culture that most obviously threatened Korean identity—enlightenment, not in the material manifestation that was identified with Japanese aspirations in Korea, but in its philosophical and moral aspects, was embraced as a defense against Japan. The early didactic journalists still advocated modernization broadly, but later writers—and not much later, about ten years—began to recognize that the fruits of any efforts to modernize materially would be snatched away by the Japanese. Later generations of writers were at best ambivalent about material progress. Rather, they focused on using the modern, western ideas of humanism, individualism and social responsibility—ideas that Japan had officially discarded—to build a new ideology of nationalism and to resist Japanese chauvinism.

Newspapers intended for the general population began to appear in the 1880s and were devoted primarily to popularizing at all levels—material, institutional, social and intellectual. But fiction as a vehicle for propagandizing these goals did not appear until 1906 when Japan had already gained control of Korea; and the works produced for the following ten years and serialized in the newspapers that had been taken over by the Japanese tended to follow Japanese ideas of what Korea's national goals should be. That is, the moral, liberal and humanistic ideas of the west were neglected when political inferences could be drawn from them. Clearly, some covert expression of nationalism and the desire for independence was possible and in fact can be found. But it was weak in this early stage.

The enlightenment novels were almost always didactic and journalistic in tone, and therefore condescending. They were primitive in technique, far from realistic in plot, characterization or style. Most literary critics in Korea consider them important only as they constitute the transition from traditional literature to modern literature. Though they drew on Japanese and translated European literature as models, they could not help but be deeply influenced by earlier Korean fiction. Some of this native tradition was later discarded as techniques such as realistic representation were introduced which made stock characters, coincidence and lapses into poetic diction seem unsophisticated. But other traditional characteristics remained, and remain to this day in the modern literature of Korea—some by choice in the service of nationalism, some by logical necessity in the character of the colloquial language.

A brief look at traditional colloquial fiction in Korea will serve to clarify what is Korean and national about modern Korean fiction, because despite the new forms that fiction took, much of the feeling of the older stories is also reflected in the modern works.

The colloquial literary tradition was late to be recorded in Korea because an adequate means of transcribing the Korean language was not invented until 1446. But *hangŭl*, the new script, was remarkably simple and well-suited to transcribing Korean as it is spoken, and its earliest use was for recording folk songs and tales from the oral tradition. The lack of any written style at all for Korean until then meant that there was no reason not to (and no alternative but to) write as the language was spoken. The elite literary tradition was foreign, and remained so even after *hangŭl* was invented, and so *hangŭl* was considered non-elite, the property of commoners and women and of those who would communicate with them. In fact, much of the literature written in *hangŭl* was written by men who could have written in Chinese but chose *hangŭl* because they wanted to express feelings and moods they

could only express in Korean—*kasa* poetry falls into this category. *Hangŭl*, which was not taken as seriously as classical Chinese, was also sometimes chosen as the medium for expressing anti-establishment ideas. Serious-seeming dissent in Chinese would have been far more dangerous than folk-inspired satire in *hangŭl*. And of course, the mistrust of and scorn for the pretensions of officials ingrained in the lower classes and in the folk tradition made the choice of *hangŭl* for sharp criticism of the status quo particularly apt.

The egalitarian *Sirhak* intellectual movement and the anti-elite native cultural renaissance that blossomed in the 17th century are considered to have inspired the *hangŭl* fiction that first appeared at that time. From the early 17th century with the appearance of *Hong Kil-tong Chŏn* (*The Tale of Hong Kil-tong*) by the *yangban* scholar Hŏ Kyun, until the end of the 19th century, nearly six hundred works of fiction in *hangŭl* appeared. There was considerable range and variety in these works, but they shared a number of characteristics that carried over into the modern literature that followed, lending it a peculiarly Korean shape and flavor.

Traditional fiction was popular and vernacular, depending greatly on dialog to tell its story. It was usually broadly humorous, often at the expense of elite pretensions. It tended to describe the social, political and economic conditions of the day, always from the point of view of the commoner. The suffering of the common people at the hands of corrupt and self-serving elites was generally resolved in a denouement in which justice prevailed, with virtue rewarded and viciousness losing its power to hurt because it has become an object of ridicule. In short, this literature was irreverent and anti-authoritarian. Possibly a legacy of the oral tradition, it was strongly, often brilliantly, lyrical—especially in expressing such emotions as sorrow, indignation, determination and joy. Characters were allowed to vent these feelings at length, usually in direct speech. More cultivated, affected, “elite” emotions tended, by contrast to be expressed symbolically, often in Chinese diction (though still rendered in *hangŭl*). These last tended to be associated with the Confucian virtues such as loyalty, chastity, honesty, etc. which as values had naturally filtered down into the folk culture over the centuries. But it is interesting to note that some values or concepts, like justice, while strong in Confucianism, remain essentially emotionally based—injustice is bad because it produces suffering, and the argument offered against it in the folk tradition is to let suffering characters vent their pain in lamentation.

The choice of modern writers to employ *hangŭl* exclusively then was, in effect, a commitment to the value system and cultural tradition that traditional *hangŭl* fiction had preserved and fostered. Probably the only conscious intention was to use *hangŭl* because it could reach the broadest possible audience and, with growing national sentiment as Korean autonomy was repeatedly threatened, to assert cultural independence from a foreign (Chinese) written tradition. This was certainly in the minds of the editors of the new newspapers. And because the first original modern Korean fiction appeared serialized in these enlightenment-oriented newspapers, following some years of translated foreign literature, the editorial and didactic goals of the medium were quite naturally a strong influence. Journalists-turned-writer no less than journalists were committed to the political goal of bringing the previously subject masses into a socially and politically integrated modern polity. This goal was clearly articulated by Yu Kil-jun (1856–1914) in the preface to his travel account *Sōyu Kyōnmun* (*Observations Made in Travels to the West*, 1895), and by Christian missionaries whose didactic methods and style were not without influence on journalists and other

writers who also had ideas they wished to promote.

The decision to write in *hangŭl* represented a commitment to Korean nationalism which was seen as most threatened by conservative political dependence on China, a dependence which the attendant cultural dependence symbolized. This identification of modernization and independence goals with a native mass rather than a foreign elite culture was a significant factor directing modern Korean literature in a very different direction from that taken by modern Japanese literature.

Twentieth century Japanese writers moved increasingly towards the privatization of experience, pushed to that position by a society that isolated them. Deprived by their individualistic ideals of any sense of community with the indoctrinated or indifferent masses, they found support for their resistance in the aestheticism and elitism of the aristocratic tradition. Korean writers under Japanese colonial rule also found themselves isolated, but for different reasons and with different results. They had no comfortable counter-culture into which they could escape the inimical, monolithic national culture of Japan. All escape routes by which they might try to survive with their dignity and special status as intellectuals intact were through Japan, the source or transmitter of the modern ideas and education that had been so unambivalently attractive before colonialism. Few modern intellectuals in Korea during the colonial period escaped painful personal alienation. But most had inklings and some saw clearly that their alienation was a psychological by-product of colonialism, and their consciousness led them to produce the two complementary mainstreams of modern Korean fiction. In both streams, alienation was resolved by denying the value of the self, the intellectual. In one sense, this was defeatism, a giving in to the feelings of despair and helplessness that result from actual and spiritual colonization. But by recognizing that they could not take pride in a status and mentality that granted respect to the oppressor, and by discarding that status, they opened the way to the possibility of building a new truly national literature.

One stream was decadent-introspective fiction in which the intellectual was shown to be degraded. Self-derision and self-disgust are prominent in novels of this sort, but in allegorical, covert ways the reader is made to understand the colonial context which has twisted and distorted even the most humanistic values. Individualism was recognized as meaningless in the Korean context, and it appeared over the years of colonial rule increasingly only as a negative ideal. The urban sophisticate, the educated elite, was an anti-hero who represented the colonized mind. The other stream was fiction that described the lives of uneducated (and thus untainted) Koreans, mostly in the countryside.

Alienated writers were committed to the ideal of realism in their fiction, all the more because they felt themselves to be removed from any acceptable reality. They felt out of touch, alienated by the very educations that defined them from easy identification with even the previous generation, let alone the historical past, or with the lower classes, the peasant masses whom they came to perceive as integral and whole, healthily and naturally resistant to the worst psychological danger of colonialism—loss of self. They by no means minimized the actual suffering of the rural population, but they saw or thought they saw in country people a strength and thus a source of hope which they themselves had lost. Country people were seen as in touch with a meaningful past and therefore more able to confront their suffering directly and overcome it. In their search for reality, writers of all schools seemed to be faced with the choice of describing the unreal, alienated suffering (given in realistic

detail) of members of their own class *or* the real suffering they perceived in the lives of the lower classes (often idealized and meaningfully presented), and gradually the rural-based stream established itself as dominant. There was no one strong literary group that argued for this; rather this was the meeting place for writers who claimed to be dedicated to a wide variety of literary doctrines.

Writers who appeared before the 1919 *Sam-il* Independence Movement forced the Japanese governor-general to inaugurate a slightly less harsh colonial policy for the sake of pacification do not fit into the pattern I have just described. Perhaps because they reached adulthood before the national humiliation of colonial takeover, they had fewer doubts about themselves or their leadership role. Their confidence (described by some critics as arrogance) enabled them to undertake to "enlighten" the masses with few doubts about the rightness of their desire to modernize Korea, even when colonialism put that goal completely in the service of the Japanese. It may never even have occurred to them that colonialism was a greater threat than "feudalism." They, like many in Japan, had colonized themselves, rejecting their former selves and identifying with the people of countries they saw as advanced. In a non-colonial, non-exploitative situation, persons with this kind of orientation offer their readers, their compatriots, one of several possible solutions to the problems that arise when a traditional culture is challenged. But for most of these enlightenment writers as for the elitist political reformers before them, dependence on Japanese power to support their cause led to the enslavement of their nation. The unfortunate congruence of their goal of modernization and the Japanese excuse for taking Korea over, and their unwillingness to rethink their position has branded most of these early didactic writers as collaborationists and traitors. It might seem that this is not a literary issue and ought not to concern literary critics. But literature is a social art, and fiction is particularly so. The modern novel is grounded in concrete social reality, and the best novels invest the concrete and the particular with an importance, a significance by virtue of its universality. Colonialism or the threat of colonialism colors every aspect of personal and social life. No literature under colonialism can escape being political. It certainly may be argued that these earliest efforts were in any case awkward, transitional literature and not of any value except historical. But it is interesting to note the political stance of these writers because of the contrast they offer to later writers in their perception of themselves and in their ideas about the role of literature.

After 1919, a flood of new ideas entered the Korean literary world. Realism, naturalism, romanticism, symbolism, decadance, imagism, intellectualism—during the 1920s and 1930s all had their adherents and their chance to make an impact on Korean literary history. Socialist literature too appeared at the same time and probably was the strongest trend, enjoying greater popularity and exerting a broader, more lasting influence on writers of other schools than that school did in Japan. Generally, it is assumed that proletarian or socialist literature is necessarily didactic in that it advocates a certain view and interpretation of life and society. But what might have been an elitist tendency to consider themselves the saviors of their countrymen was tempered by the personal doubts that even the most ideologically and politically committed writers felt. Despite stated intentions, proletarian writers, like those who preferred to call themselves nationalists or purists, looked outside themselves and their class of origin to find solutions to the problems facing all Koreans.

In Korea, all literary trends—didactic, aesthetic, proletarian, etc.—coexisted and indeed flourished together. The adherents of each firmly asserted their distinctness from the others

in extra-literary statements, but reference to their works suggests that it is possible to see them all as different currents in one stream, all drifting in a direction dictated perhaps more by their common situation under colonialism than by their different rational decisions and ideas. Korean writers, like their Japanese counterparts, formed coteries and published little magazines, engaged in violent literary controversies (especially virulent with the advent of specifically partisan political literature), and suffered severe political repression that could not but negatively affect their creative talents. They gathered together loosely in what they called the *mundan* (*bundan* in Japanese) and depended considerably on mutual support as well as antagonism for their continued efforts.

Let me now return to some of these points in greater detail, linking them to the question of the social status and consciousness of the writers. I will touch upon the major trends in the development of modern Korean literature in the colonial period, illustrating them with examples from the lives and works of representative writers.

From its inception to the end of Japanese colonial rule in 1945, Korean literature may, for convenience, be divided into four categories, roughly chronological but with much overlapping: enlightenment literature, pure literature, leftist literature and rural literature.

Enlightenment literature came first, in the form of *sin sosŏl* (new novels), with Yi In-jik's *Hyŏl ūi nu* (*Tears of Blood*, 1906) the first and representative work of this type. The *sin sosŏl* were transitional both in their use of language and in their conception of what a novel is. All were didactic, written with the intention of introducing new ideas and values, almost invariably modern Western ideas and values, filtered through Japan. The writers seemed motivated by the same values that motivated the political reformers who preceded them, modernization for the sake of independence. But their cause was from the beginning a lost one, for by 1906 Japanese intentions in Korea were obvious. Korean literary critics in later years have not been kind to these awkwardly experimental enlightenment writers whom they also judge to have been pro-Japanese. Quite probably they were, insofar as they admired Japan's modernization and saw it as an acceptable model for Korea. As for literary quality, not much can be claimed for them, except as they form the probably necessary transition from traditional fiction to the modern novel, both stylistically and thematically. They were popular rather than elite in their appeal (though certainly at that time their audience cannot have been large), employing many of the expected and appreciated devices of traditional fiction—stereotyped characters, melodrama, coincidence and happy endings. But they experimented with description in colloquial language, analysis of motivation, and the deliberate inclusion of ideas in the plot. Thematically, they tended to be love stories, often set abroad, with the protagonists educated, anti-traditional, but patriotic young people. Enlightenment literature was highly purposive, employing both barely disguised hortation and fictional modeling for its didactic purposes. The writers of this fiction, in true Confucian fashion, assumed that ideas were powerful and could shape the future. In this faith in “the priority of cultural-intellectual phenomena in shaping all other phenomena in society,”¹ they were blind to at least some of the political realities of their day. Later writers, whether possessed of the same faith in ideas, or, as is more likely in many cases, merely barred by their colonial condition from more overtly political acts, continued to see

¹ Paul S. Ropp, “The May 4 Movement,” “Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars” Vol. 12, No. 2, 1980, p. 58.

literary works as agents for change through consciousness-raising.

The first writer to appear after the enlightenment writers was the literary giant, Yi Kwang-su (1892-?),² better known in Korea by his pen-name, Ch'unwŏn. Yi is not generally categorized as a writer of one school or period or another because his work was so varied and so voluminous, spanning almost the whole of the colonial period, from 1917 to 1945 and after. He wrote poetry as well as fiction, short stories as well as the long sustained novels for which he is most famous. His command of the modern language, his many stylistic innovations, his unswerving dedication to realistic representation of persons and events, and the skill with which he structured his novels around the important issues and ideas of the time far surpassed what his predecessors were capable of. And yet, in his conception of literature and in his view of himself and his role as a writer, he closely resembled these predecessors. Perhaps this can be attributed to his age and the fact that he first went to Japan in 1904 when this was rare and gave him a privileged perspective on his own country that he felt it his duty to share. He had lost his parents to cholera in 1902, but his family seems to have been wealthy, probably of the land-owning class. He attended a Korean school for two years before accepting a scholarship from the Ilchinhŏe (a society notorious for its pro-Japanese posture) in 1904 to study at Taijō Chūgakkō in Japan. In 1906, as a third year middle school student, he transferred to Meiji Gakuen after some falling out with the Ilchinhŏe as it appears. It is not hard to imagine that Yi's patriotism and appreciation of the danger to Korea that Japan represented were finely honed in these years in Japan. And, in any case, it was while he was in Japan that Japan took Korea as a protectorate. At Meiji Gakuen, Yi found other Koreans with whom he organized a club, the Sonyŏnhŏe (Boys' Club) which proceeded to publish the first literary magazine in Korean "Sonyŏn" ("Boys," 1908-1911). Yi did not contribute any original literature to this monthly, but it may be assumed that he contributed to the formation of editorial policy and with translation and miscellaneous articles. Although it was the first magazine, "Sonyŏn" and perhaps its successor, the more literary "Ch'ŏngch'un" ("Youth", 1914), represent the end of an era. They were, in their conception, enlightenment magazines, intended to educate their readers, broaden their horizons and, in a word, modernize them. This was made explicit in the introduction to the first issue of "Sonyŏn": "Let us make Korea a country of children and so educate them that they will be able to bear the responsibility (and destiny) of the nation upon their shoulders."³ Yi and the other guiding lights behind these magazines had a sense of mission not unlike that of the earlier political reformers and the first enlightenment novelists. They were optimistic, excited by the new, "modern" ideas they had discovered, and believed in their own abilities. They attacked their own traditional culture, trusting that the modern ideas they propagated would save their nation. Doubtless, they were naive, but in their innocence was strength, the strength to act and hope. To Yi's generation, this was natural; later generations had to work through agonizing self-doubt before they were able, if ever, to believe in their own efficacy or the efficacy of literature and literacy. The colonialism that overtook Yi and his generation did not stop them but only served to deepen their commitment to saving their nation. Yi continued throughout his career to attack tradition,

² Yi was apparently kidnapped during the Korean War and brought to the north where it is believed he died in 1955.

³ Translated by Chang Duk-sun in "Literary Magazines in the Past," "Korea Journal" August 1962, p. 19.

but he also struggled untiringly against Japanese imperialism, and especially that most insidious product of imperialism, the colonized spirit. This is not to say that Yi was impervious to doubt, increasingly over the years of colonial rule, about what precisely the intellectuals had to teach to their fellow countrymen. But until the late 1930s when Yi is considered to have capitulated to Japanese pressure (doubtless in part due to his confidence in himself and his unwillingness to stop writing altogether), Yi was unequivocally a patriot and didact whose literary talents set his highly purposive novels far above the generality of didactic literature. Even his critics in the pure literature camp could not touch him, and more often than not were themselves influenced by him. Yi's importance lies not only in himself and his special talents, but in his immense popularity throughout his career. He wrote what Koreans wanted to hear. It may well be wondered whether he was more a teacher or a reflection of the spirit of his times and of his country.

Not long after Yi appeared on the literary scene, new trends in literature brought writers to the fore who claimed to be writing "pure" literature with no ulterior motive. They were self-styled urban decadent intellectuals. While Yi Kwang-su was a confident moralist and a humanist in the Tolstoyan tradition, this group (loosely defined) denied morality as they denied themselves. Strongly influenced by the naturalists and symbolists both in Japan and Europe, they purported to look for and describe things as they were. Refusing to deceive themselves with false hope, they bravely if narrowly faced their own despair. After the failure of the March 1, 1919 Independence Movement, intellectuals and writers became deeply pessimistic and nihilistic. The literary trends had flowed all at once and ready-made into Korea from Japan—naturalism, symbolism, romanticism, aestheticism and decadence—but it is hard to see them as foreign, so well did they suit the current mental state of writers. Social responsibility had become an absurdity in colonial Korea. Writers felt powerless and increasingly incapable of fulfilling the leadership roles they felt their education had prepared them for. They confessed their weakness, described their escape into private reality, expressed their fatalism. They felt hopeless and self-destructive. The most famous exponent of this mood appeared in the mid-1930s when a second wave of despair hit the intellectual community with increased Japanese repression. This was Kim Hae-kyōng (1912–1939) who wrote under the self-mocking pen-name of Yi Sang. Kim, Yi and Pak being the most common Korean surnames, one can imagine that at least some of the Japanese in Korea thought one as good as another for addressing any Korean. "Sang" is how Koreans tend to hear the Japanese term of address, "san." Thus, Yi Sang must have meant "anonymous Korean" to Kim Hae-kyōng, a perfect satirization of the colonized, alienated spirit. Yi Sang, though writing in a thoroughly decadent style, was far more self-conscious and ironic than his predecessors in this style. Because he was aware of the social context of his personal frame of mind, his self-disparagement is barbed with irony. As Yi Kwang-su's genius transformed awkward enlightenment literature into great masterpieces of humanism, Yi Sang's transcendent literary talent transformed the decadent tradition into a vehicle for multi-leveled analysis of the plight of the intellectual who would remain pure and true to himself in the colonial context of social and moral disintegration.

Yi Sang began his adult life in a job as architect in the public works section of the Japanese colonial government, but he quit his job at age 23 and tried to support himself with a tearoom, assisted by a woman he lived with. His stories never mention the colonial context, but without it his hero (himself) would shrink to insignificance. No one who reads Yi Sang's

works can doubt the magnitude of the tragedy he described.

Yi Sang's representative work was *Nalgae* (*Wings*, 1936) in which the technique employed is stream-of-consciousness psychological realism. The protagonist is an ineffectual, despondent intellectual whose story is told from the inside; the work is considered by most critics to be highly autobiographical. Like many young intellectuals in colonial Korea, this young man attempted to remain unsullied by the moral swamp that reality had become by retreating into a completely private anti-social world. He has no friends and no work. He is married and his wife supports him on her earnings as a prostitute. Thus he is completely free to indulge himself, for example, in the aesthetic luxury of long observation of the patterns of sunlight on a collection of bottles of his wife's cosmetics; but mostly he just kills time. His alienation is so complete that nothing has more value than anything else. He is not waiting; he would not know what to hope for even. He just is, but his existence is conscious and he records every meaningless, futile thought. In *Nalgae*, Yi Sang is describing a sort of demi-monde existence, but he is deeply ironic as Japanese writers in this genre are not. He was personally aware, from his own experience, that escape from humiliating reality cannot really be effected and that the escapist life is merely a pose, often involving deep self-deception. The alienated, isolated individual in all of Yi Sang's works mirrors in his dead-end life the fate of his nation. There is no individual, no free will, no meaning under colonial rule. Read allegorically (as much colonial literature must be), the wife might be a sold-out Korea, the useless, dependent man with his spirit sapped out of him the intellectuals. Far from amoral, this story fairly shrieks the pain of alienation and meaninglessness that plagued intellectuals at that time. Yi Sang is not at all unique in describing self-contempt, the failure of self-respect, but he carried it to its limits and beyond. Even the most grossly offensive passages leave the reader feeling more compassion than disgust. This is because the allegorical reading, the social context of the lone individual is known though unexpressed. That the Japanese censors considered him dangerous is testified to by his death at the Tokyo University Hospital after being released from prison to die. He had been imprisoned for "thought offenses."

Yi Sang was a distillation of the urban decadent writer, writing at a time when hopelessness was the only option it seemed, not one of several as it was in the early 1920s. By the late 1930s when Yi Sang was writing, there could be no doubt what the Japanese intended for Korea—cultural extermination. As an honest intellectual, he could not but find his life meaningless; even as his writing expanded the stylistic range of the Korean language, he saw his stories as elegies to his lost role.

The earlier exponents of the decadent form, of pure literature as they called it, had been disappointed by the failure of the March 1 Movement, but the Japanese had been frightened enough by it to embark on a new conciliatory policy in Korea. Writers became then relatively free to write and publish. But it was an empty freedom as they well knew, and it was not long before, disenchanted with themselves and their own lives, pure literature advocates found themselves looking to the countryside, to rural villages. Here they found the inspiration they needed to express the soul of Korea in the aesthetic prose they had developed. For these writers too were nationalist and for all their theories about pure art could not be content with atomized existence even in their fictional works. If the urban intellectual was decadent, they reasoned, the opposite side of the coin was that the rural peasant was the hope of Korea. The city had never been the heart of Korea, and in the 20th century as

throughout the Yi dynasty, the disillusioned idealist looked to the countryside to find uncorrupted purity of spirit. In fact, during the Yi dynasty, the ascription of *yangban* status to clans with strong rural bases, and the greater loyalty to clan even than to king, insured that the word "*kohyang*" (native place, in Korea synonymous with rural village) would carry deep patriotic connotations.

Other aesthetic and historical reasons for favoring rural themes, reasons that must definitely have attracted the pure literature writers, is so well described by Richard Rutt that I shall merely quote him at length here:

If the Chinese-derived vocabulary can be characterized as rich, the Korean vocabulary can be characterized as delicate. The language contains a huge number of near-synonyms, and the value of a word in composition is not that it carries many layers of meaning like the Chinese, but that it carries a precise emotional and lexical value. There are perhaps a dozen words to describe the coolness of the day or swiftness of movement, and the value of each lies in its exact emotional import. These are the qualities that modern literature likes, because modern literature does not emphasize its compliments to the breadth of the reader's learning and his ability to recognize allusions. Traditional Korean education was classically oriented, which partly explains why even popular literature was so heavily imbued with Chinese phrases, but when writers wished to be lyrically precise they used Korean vocabulary. This is especially so in writing about rural life. The inspiration of rural poetry was often equally divided between a genuine reaction of pleasure to the charms of the countryside and the orthodoxy of Confucius's own praise of agriculture and the simple life. This penchant was reinforced by the reaction of disgust against the intrigues and factions of the Korean court. This reaction animated a great deal of Korean poetry after the fifteenth century, and was reechoed in the twentieth century when the Japanese censorship made it hard for writers to grapple with political and urban social problems. In both cases the tackling of rural subjects encouraged the modern exploration of purely Korean language resources.⁴

Any number of examples can be cited, but perhaps the point can best be made with the works of Kim Tong-in (1900–1951?) who not only wrote what he called pure literature, but defended it and attacked writers who professed to have extra-literary purposes in numerous critical essays. Some of Kim's stories indeed do seem to have no particular message and seem important only as stylistic forerunners of later Korean literature. Still, most of his works, including what is said to be his representative piece, *Kamcha* (*Potatoes*, 1925), are hardly distinguishable from the works of the enlightenment or the proletarian writers of the same period. *Kamcha* is set in the slums of Kim's hometown of P'yongyang. The protagonist is a woman, daughter of a poor farmer, who marries badly and whose life is a downhill struggle, ending in her humiliation, degradation and death. The narrative is

⁴ Richard Rutt, "The Translator and the Diction of Old Korean Literature," "Literature East and West" Vol. XIV, No. 3, September 1970, pp. 453–4.

direct and unflinching in its description of character and events. Doubtless, it is a pure example of early naturalistic realism in modern Korean literature. But Kim and most others of the pure literature school differ markedly from exponents of this school in Japan, especially in choice of locale, in the social class of the characters and in the general tone. It is not about the demi-monde, but the real inescapable suffering of a person trapped by circumstances in the lowest of low lives.

Kamcha cannot be read as a story of an individual. It begs to be interpreted in a greater social context. It is remotely possible, though no Korean critic that I have read has ever considered it, that the claim to be writing "art-for-art's-sake" was a blind thrown out to deceive the Japanese censors. More likely, however, Kim and his followers were enough influenced by Japanese and European literary standards to insist, even while writing as their colonial condition dictated, that they could and did write "good" literature. I am not here suggesting that it was bad, only that pure literature in Korea was not apolitical, nor could be under colonialism. Art-for-art's-sake, even at its most apparently apolitical, was certainly pursued at first as a kind of nationalism. Having internalized Western and Japanese scorn for overtly didactic literature as unsophisticated, underdeveloped and backward, these writers tried to deny Korea's traditional cultural bias towards that kind of literature, and determined to prove that Korea could produce real literature of quality by outside standards. If they were mistaken in this, it was a mistake also made by many in Japan, a natural confusion bred of the odd mixture of ideas fed to them in Japanese universities. Their mistake, if it was a mistake, was not unlike that of the enlightenment writers who thought that modernization and colonialism were separate issues. The pure literature writers in Korea tried to prove Korean literature the equal of "advanced" Japanese and European literatures, but they soon betrayed their declared intensions, perhaps unconsciously, to join in the general task laid before Korean writers by their colonized condition, that of defining for themselves and their readers what Korea was. And the definition, the Korean identity that emerged from the works of these writers as from those of most of their contemporaries of whatever political or literary stamp, was one of rural poverty and suffering, borne with dignity and thus overcome.

Naturally, the leftist writers, who also began to appear in the early 1920s and who also chose most often to describe rural suffering, tended to dwell less on passive endurance than on righteous anger and the will to overcome. Proletarian writers in pre-industrial Korea had no choice but to describe the class that had in fact become a kind of rural proletariat, the tenant farmers, whose ranks became swollen under Japanese rule. Not until the late 1930s when leftist literature had been completely suppressed did Korea begin to have a significant number of workers in industry, as Japan accelerated the development of industry in the north in preparation for war in China. Stories about factory workers were written by Korean proletarian writers, but these are outnumbered and surpassed in every way by stories with a rural perspective. This reflects actual conditions in Korea. It has been estimated that by 1939, 70% of farm families in the rich agricultural areas of the south had become full tenants, and that if part-tenants are included the figure reaches a staggering 94%.⁵ In considering the rural basis of even proletarian literature in Korea, it is interesting to note that "Kaepyök" ("Creation," 1920), one of the earliest magazines in Korea and the

⁵ Hatada, *A History of Korea*.

first non-coterie, mass-circulation magazine, was put out by the Chōndokyo sect which had developed out of the 19th century Tonghak religion and strongly supported the cause of class struggle. It was not a literary magazine, but it contained a section devoted to proletarian literature. It may be supposed that Chōndokyo would have an interest not only in class struggle but in rural conditions in general, as this religion was indiginous and rural based.

Other inspirations for the development of leftist literature in Korea included the growing popularity of that school in Japan, and the disappointment and frustration after the failure of the non-revolutionary March 1, 1919 Independence Movement. Dependence on the bourgeois democratic nations to help secure independence had failed, and many Korean intellectuals and politically conscious members of the proletariat (if such they could be called) began to look to socialist revolution for national salvation. This was essentially a political development, but in a country like Korea with a strongly didactic literary tradition, it should not be surprising that literature was taken up as a promising vehicle for mass-education and consciousness-raising. In much of proletarian literature, as in enlightenment literature, there was an elitist tendency in the didacticism, but in the best works there was a tension between recognition of the need for political organizers from outside and the inherent, native strength in rural communities of people. Proletarian literature has been much maligned, not least by some of its proponents who later succumbed to strong Japanese pressure to defect from the cause (notable among these Pak Yōng-hŭi and Paek Ch'öl), but this movement was very important in opening to general discussion the question "what is literature?" Whatever answer any individual writer arrived at, the result of this questioning was increased literary activity and the beginning of a tradition of serious literary criticism.

The earliest explicitly leftist works were called new tendency or people's literature. These works described the lives of persons of the lower classes (which in colonial Korea was the majority of the population), especially in the rural areas, depicted starkly the harshness of their lives, and generally climaxed with an instance of active resistance against the source of their oppression. Without exception, these works showed violence (murder, arson, etc.) as the natural reaction to injustice. The characters were strong and expressed strong anger, more as a catharsis, however, with violence welling up as an emotional reaction, than sublimated into disciplined movement activity. They were people who had been pushed too far, and they make for very powerful and dramatic literature, despite the fact that these stories were often garnished unnecessarily with political slogans. Later, full-fledged proletarian literature tended to be more sophisticated in the literary expression of ideology and thus harder to distinguish from the literature of other schools. In fact, often a work can be identified as pure literature or proletarian literature or whatever only by what the author has said about it or about himself, and this has proven to be a very poor guide. Even the great literary debates between the proponents of nationalist literature (Yi Kwang-su among them) and proletarian literature seem meaningless when specific works are referred to. Over the years, there was a gradual coming to agreement about what the proper concerns of Korean literature should be, and proletarian literature no less than the other streams concurred in the importance of the rural situation. One reason for this in the case of leftist writers was certainly a matter of economics. In colonial Korea, Japanese policy hit the countryside hardest and exploitation was easiest to show there.

One of the best writers of the proletarian group was Yi Ki-yōng (1896-?) who wrote

almost exclusively about rural themes, most often expressing his political message covertly and symbolically as might be expected of anyone in a repressive society. For example, in *Chwibul* (*Rat Fire*, 1932), nothing is explicit, but anyone would know what the final scene really was about. The setting of field fires to smoke out all the rats that had infested the land and gotten fat on stolen grain could not be read as anything but an allegory. But in his monumental work, *Kohyang* (*Native Soil* or *Home*, 1933), Yi Ki-yŏng skillfully combines minute attention to realistic detail in everyday rural life with description of the economic deterioration in the countryside, and analysis of the colonial, capitalistic exploitation that produced it. Against this, he sets descriptions of how the people respond, both individually and in alliances with others similarly oppressed. *Kohyang* is recognizable as proletarian literature primarily because it describes concrete, constructive and concerted action against a clearly perceived oppressor. But in many other aspects, it resembles works that come out of the enlightenment movement or even the pure literature movement. To give just one example, the intellectual whose role it is to make clear the necessary connections between conditions and causes of suffering knows that he is weaker than the village he has come ostensibly to serve. The old rural institutions of communal cooperation and village festivals are seen as models of the new socialism rather than things to be swept away by the new ideas. Yi Ki-yŏng's intellectual is not in doubt about his task, but he has no illusions about his own importance or strength. He does not see himself as a self-appointed teacher. Rather, he is humbled by the strength of the country people. This novel, written when Japanese censorship had already begun to decimate the ranks of leftist writers, was not, nor could have been, very explicitly political, but it is one of the most successful and powerful of all the proletarian works, both politically and literarily. And, as must be obvious, proletarian writers, while supported by theory about class consciousness, were hard put to find much of a native oppressor class. It was there, certainly, in the form of collaborationists. But, as in China where leftists and nationalists cooperated in the struggle against Japanese aggression, Korean leftists put anti-imperialist, nationalist struggle before anti-bourgeois, class struggle. Class struggle, class consciousness is not neglected, but conditions tended to blur class distinctions in Korea, and to most, class struggle seemed to merge easily into anti-Japanese struggle. The real enemy was seen as Japan, and so leftist literature, especially in the subtler manifestations that censorship required, was often remarkably similar to the other literature being written at that time. And when KAPF, the organizational structure for proletarian writers, was destroyed by the Japanese in 1935, the remnants of this literary movement found allies among their former ideological sparring partners to continue producing rural inspired literature.

Han Sŏrya (1902–), another proletarian writer, wrote this letter to Yi Ki-yŏng after being released from prison in 1935 and returning to his hometown:

I want to scrutinize my environment deeply and I want to dig a bit further in what is at my feet. Both this ordinary town and my worthless life make me feel that they are extremely fine virgin soil upon which I can sow with my own hands and dig anew. I don't know how long it's been since I forgot this worthless soil. I lament, too, along with the joy and surprise, at discovering the regions I had forgotten.⁶

Translated from the *Hanguk Munhak Taesajŏn* (Munwŏngak, 1973) by M. Pihl.

For all that this is meant to be taken on several levels simultaneously, one thing that is clear from this is that rural themes are, for the great number of writers who were first generation urbanites, a sentimental journey, a personal as well as social return home.

Meanwhile, during the 1920s and early 1930s, other writers, led by Yi Kwang-su, who had chosen didacticism and had preached enlightenment, including rural enlightenment and literacy, as a way out of Korea's troubles, had reached a similar point by a slightly different route. Early on, they found themselves faced with an irresolvable conflict between modernization and nationalism. There could be no doubt after 1919 that Japan's seizure of Korea and its efforts to modernize Korea's infrastructure were not motivated by altruism and did not include any plan for Korea's immediate or eventual independence. So, they had to rethink their position. Modernization had been the goal, and tradition the enemy. Now the enemy was Japan, and this enemy was actively proselytizing modernization, but for whom? This group of intellectuals naturally became confused, and felt less secure in their role as agents of enlightenment. They began to see the countryside less as a place to go to teach and more as a spring of wisdom at which they might drink. But a confused mish-mash of these two attitudes towards the countryside was the most common. Look at this passage from Yi Kwang-su's novel *Hŭk* (*Soil*, 1932-3)⁷ for one example of the strange blend of condescension and masochistic idealism in attitudes toward the countryside. For the educated urban intellectual, going to live in a village represented sacrifice, even when they were perfectly conscious that the city had nothing to offer them as long as Korea was in the hands of the Japanese.

I'll return to farm life! Even without money, it's a good life.
I'll go to a farm village. When I get there, I will eat the same poor meals the poor farmers eat, and live in a shabby house just like them.
I will serve the poor and weak farmers, writing letters for them and attending to their interests at the Myŏn Office or the police station.
I will spend my life teaching them, establishing a consumer coop for them, and sweeping out the toilets and kitchens of their houses.⁸

From this, one can see most clearly that one problem for Korea's intellectual class was to find a purpose in life, a usefulness. The class from which most of them came, the upper, landowning class, was itself by this time completely demoralized. Under the Japanese, they could no longer stay rich without collaborating, but if they cooperated with the Japanese, they felt they had sold their souls—certainly those who prospered may have felt so. Writers, with their generally superior education, gained a moral superiority over the generality of their inherited class in two ways. First, their profession offered them few material rewards but they could console themselves that they were neither exploiting their fellow countrymen nor selling out. And secondly, they generally had adopted idealistic, universalistic ideologies which crossed class lines (in their pure forms at least)—democracy, socialism or communism, in some form or other, often combined with Christian humanism and incorporating concepts of human dignity and rights, equality and freedom. These ideologies and hopes for their materialization stood in sharp contrast to the actual conditions of repression in

⁷ Serialized in the *Dong-A Ilbo*, April 1932–July 1933, but expressive of attitudes beginning to surface in the 1920s.

⁸ Adapted from translation by Kim Song-hyeon in the *Korea Times*.

Korea under Japanese colonialism. But Japanese policy contributed greatly to the formation of this class of idealists in the first place.

Had the Japanese colonial administration provided suitable occupation commensurate to the intellectual abilities and achievements of young Koreans, in an environment of intellectual, political and economic freedom, it can be argued that at least some of the intelligensia would have lost their spirit of resistance. But this was not the case, and given the economic exploitation at the root of all imperialistic enterprise, perhaps it could not have been different. Korean intellectuals were, in the late 19th century, Japanophiles, hating China for its corrupt connections to an outworn and corrupt Korean dynasty, for propping it up to resist the healthy changes that Korea needed to survive as a nation in the modern world. Japan was seen as a model, young and vital, and the ideas that reached Korea through Japan were picked up as weapons with which to fight the *ancien regime*.

But intellectuals (and especially writers) in Korea had to revise their attitude towards Japan when Japan became the "owner" of Korea. All the varieties of new ideology merged on one point—national liberation. All wrongs, all injustices, all suffering (physical or spiritual) seemed to stem from the colonial situation. It is perhaps debatable whether Japan was benevolent or not in its administration of Korea. Certainly, after the shock of massive, though generally peaceful, demonstrations for self-determination beginning on March 1, 1919, colonial policy became ostensibly milder for the sake of pacification. More schools were built, public works commenced, censorship eased temporarily. But autonomy for Koreans was never a Japanese goal, and in this lay the seeds of discontent. Most Koreans never adjusted to the idea that Korea had ceased to exist. Some worked actively from bases outside Korea. Those remaining inside indulged in what turned out to be self-preserving fantasy. But barred from actually working to achieve their dreams, too dependent on imaginations they increasingly doubted for their sense of self and nation, intellectuals found themselves farther and farther removed from reality. Thus, the attraction to the solid, simple reality of the country villages. Korean literature reflects this attraction amply. Every writer, from the most decadent urban intellectual to the most committed revolutionary, harbored sentimental attitudes towards the farm village and what it had come to stand for—pure, uncorrupted Korea. In the process of coming to see the countryside in this way, a revision in the attitude towards tradition was also effected. Previously, westernized youth rebelled against what was seen as reactionary feudalism. But when the Japanese Governor-General took a position against tradition and against Korea, against them, Korean intellectuals were left without any position at all except to resist the foreign power which left them powerless.

And yet who could see better than they what was happening to Korea and why? The genuine attraction of modernization became entangled with the contradictions inherent in imperialist modernization. Intellectuals were forced to look again to the traditions they had learned to despise, but it was too late to go back to the old Confucian authoritarianism. Perhaps they remembered that the opening for the Japanese occupation of Korea had come during a showdown between the factionalized Yi Court and the Tong-hak farmers. Korea had been arrested in the midst of an anti-Japanese popular uprising—the unrest stabilized but never resolved, never forgotten. Later, when writers and other intellectuals were looking for Korea, for themselves, for their identity, they recognized the strength of the countryside where a tough resistance to authority was almost institutionalized over the centuries.

Unlike Japan, which looked to an aristocratic past (the emperor system) to build a modern sense of identity as a nation, Koreans, through force of circumstances, began to see the essence of Korean-ness in peasant attitudes, customs and conditions. Poverty and suffering were the reality for the majority of Koreans under any government, but under colonial administration, a literate, liberal intellectual class of people, powerless to act on their own behalf, and depressed economically themselves, made into second class citizens in their own country, identified with the lowest stratum of society. Thus, the proponents of pure literature and committed literature alike chose as their subject matter the reality of life in the rural areas. Rural literature in Japan was a single offshoot of a strong if short-lived mainline of socialist fiction. In Korea, it became the heart of all resistance literature, which is to say, of all modern literature.

Needless to say, this rural tendency in modern Korean literature is losing ground today in the post-war industrial age, but even now it is observable and probably will continue to be as long as the nationalist aspirations of Koreans remain thwarted by the division of their country.