

A Critical Discussion of the Transition of 'Pre-modern' to 'Modern' Korean Literature: Individualism as a Measure for Modernity?

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In the field of Korean literature studies, one can often come across a narrative similar as to the one found in Peter Lee's seminal work *A History of Korean Literature*.¹

The imposition of the poet's will and interpretation reflects a change in the relationship between the poet and his audience: the poem radically lessens the distance between the two. **It breaks with the tradition of generalized and impersonal poetry and presents itself with the immediacy of something distinctive and individual.**²

Analysing the first "modern" Korean poem, Choe Namsŏn's "From the Sea to Children" (Hae-egesŏ sonyŏn-ege, 1908), Peter Lee makes the statement here that an important element of Ch'oe's poem that qualifies it as a modern poem, lies in the fact that a clear break can be seen with the poems that came before it. Traditional poems are classified as being of a general nature and impersonal, while modern poems show something personal and unique. In other words, the poems presents individuality. This leaves one with the idea that a clear distinction can be seen between pre-modern and modern literature, which is explained as a difference between the pastoral collectivistic village lifestyle of the pre-modern period that got transplanted by several rapid changes in society that shattered this older constellation. Economic changes, technological progress, urbanisation, and other factors eventually led people to feel alienated and the cultural reaction of artists was to start searching for what made them and humans unique as individuals.

Another commonly found argument that derives from this, is that the concept of individuality was a translated one and did not exist (or was discussed) in Asia before modernity and the influence of outside forces, particularly from the West. Peter Lee also stresses outside influence as the major stimulus for Korea's change to cultural modernity: "The act of reinventing literature in East Asia usually required a revaluation of the past. Inventing modern literature, however, required a radical revaluation of the past because its major stimulus came from outside."³ That scholars of Korean literature search for the origins of Korea's cultural modernity in its adoption of western ideas can further be seen in Park Sangjin's book *A Comparative Study of Korean Literature: Literary Migration* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), where he defines modernity as follows:

¹ This article was supported in part through the Core University Program for Korean Studies of the Academy of Korean Studies (AKS-2016-OLU-2250003).

² Lee, Peter. *A History of Korean Literature*. Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 340 [emphasis added].

³ Lee, A *History of Korean Literature*, p. 336

I personally understand modernity or modernization as a social and cultural phenomenon of a certain period and area. In other words, it indicates a historical phenomenon of the Western world since the emergence of a world economy in the sixteenth century and the industrial revolution in the eighteenth century. In this respect, we can define modernity or modernization in Asian countries as westernization.⁴

This emphasis on individualism as an indicator of modernity can also be seen in a recently published book by Yoon Sun Yang. In it she argues that “the individual did not burst onto the Korean literary scene through one innovative work but emerged gradually through a trajectory of translation.”⁵ She tries to reinforce her point of individuality not existing prior to its translation from European culture (and that therefore the answer to the origins of Korea’s cultural modernity should be found outside) by showing that “there was no equivalent word in Korean for the notion of the individual.”⁶ It is true that there was no clear equivalent in Korean. What scholars of literature have forgotten to discuss is that the intellectuals of the time had a very specific purpose to invent and translate terms into new words: they had the belief that even though similar concepts might have been discussed previously, they wanted to create a radical break from what they saw as an old and outdated way of thinking. They therefore deliberately did not search for equivalents when discussing such concepts like individuality, even though they may well have been there.⁷

We have by now seen that especially in the field of Korean literature, ‘individuality’ is seen by many scholars as one of the central categories that define the start of Korea’s cultural modernity. Does this mean that the roots of modern individuality cannot be found in pre-modern times and was adopted into Korean culture from outside influences? In this lecture I would like to contest this idea and claim that, in the case of Korean literature, individualism already existed in the pre-modern period. The concept of the individual certainly existed before this time, and was also discussed by scholars. What changed is that through the historical circumstances, in specific the threat of colonial powers, intellectuals active in the cultural field started to claim(!) that the individual was an important element for the formation of a modern society. For this reason individualism became more foregrounded, but only in order to put the individual in a different collective: that of the nation.

All in all, it is my belief that a more accurate description of the intellectual and cultural changes that occurred around the turn of the 20th century is required and that we should avoid running the risk of falling into the trap of believing the intellectuals of the early twentieth century at face value and see their introducing of outside ideas as a clear break from what came before. I am not alone in this belief. Michael Seth, a scholar of Korean history, has highlighted the dangers that can occur when scholars overemphasize the outside influences that Korea was subjected to around the turn of the twentieth century.

If we think that our capitalist nation-states are the height of rationality and that there is a clear disjuncture between pre-modern irrational behaviour and rational modern behaviour, then we risk reducing human history before the railroad to a timeless, agricultural idyll or a

⁴ Park, Sangjin. *A Comparative Study of Korean Literature: Literary Migration*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, p. 47.

⁵ Yang, Yoon Sun. *From Domestic Women to Sensitive Young Men: Translating the Individual in Early Colonial Korea*. Harvard University Asia Center, 2017, p. 4.

⁶ Ibid., p. 8.

⁷ One example of this deliberate effort can be found in Yi Kwangsu’s essay “What is Literature?”, where he acknowledges that the term “literature” (munhak) was discussed and existed prior, but that the term should be defined and translated according to what is meant in the English language with “literature”.

dark, oppressive purgatory, depending on your preference. What is worse, we risk dismissing the rest of the world outside Europe to a place where people simply waited to be given what Europeans had made in their workshop and finally we risk ignoring lessons to be learned from the deep experiences Koreans have had with post-feudal, rational structures.⁸

Let's have a look at how the idea of individualism as a key element in pinpointing the break between Korea's pre-modern and modern culture came about.

The individuality = modern argument

A lot of our ideas concerning Korea's cultural modernity and how it relates to what came before come from the father of modern Korean literature Yi Kwangsu (1892-1950). Two of his essays on literature stand out in this respect. In "The Value of Literature" (Munhak-ŭi kach'i) written in 1910, Yi defines literature as "written compositions that embody human feelings and emotions (*chǒng*)," and laments that Confucian societies like China and Chosŏn neglected *chǒng* in favour of knowledge (*chi*) and will (*ŭi*).⁹ In his other essay "What is Literature?" (Munhak iran hao) from 1916 he expands on this idea and pinpoints Korea's reliance on Chinese culture as barriers preventing Korea from developing into a modern country. Literature serves the function to renew Korean society, and even though he acknowledges that the term literature (*munhak*) has been around for a long time, the term must be understood in its European sense as a translation of the English word "literature." He stresses that cultural traditions of the West should be taken as a model in order for Korea to develop. The difference between the pre-modern and modern notion of literature is obvious to Yi: The cultural differences between Korea and the West lie in the earlier emphasis in Western societies on individuality.

In the past in every country in the world, human emotions were trivialized while knowledge was prioritized, which demonstrates that **people had no clear notion of individuality back then.**¹⁰

Spontaneity and individuality are both encapsulated in Yi's concept of *chǒng* and Yi on several occasions makes the claim that it was this element that was lacking in old literature and kept Korea from developing. This argument for viewing the old literature as backward is also found in other intellectuals' writings from this period, all in an effort to try and diminish the value of traditional literature. In an effort to create a distinctive break from what came before, Yi states that spontaneity and individuality was non-existent (or severely repressed) before. However, the famous writer and scholar Su Shi (蘇軾, 1037-1101) already had this very same argument in the 11th century! As Zhiyi Yang has shown, Su Shi saw spontaneity and individuality as a very important element in the arts, and his views left an important influence on how Chinese literary culture would henceforth develop: "The emphasis on spontaneity was correlated with the increasingly bold expression of individualism shaping major Chinese literati arts since the eleventh century. [...] Su Shi compared the individuality of artistic styles to the individuality of female beauty, both not necessarily perfect."¹¹ In traditional Korean culture we may find numerous works that show a distinct spontaneity and

⁸ Seth, Michael. *Routledge Handbook of Modern Korean History*. Routledge, 2016, p. 92.

⁹ Yi, Kwangsu. "The Value of Literature" (Munhak- ŭi Kach'i). *Azalea* 4 (2011), p. 288.

¹⁰ Yi, Kwangsu. "What is Literature?" *Azalea* 4.1 (2011), p. 295 [emphasis added].

¹¹ Yang, Zhiyi. *Dialectics of Spontaneity: The Aesthetics and Ethics of Su Shi in Poetry*. Brill, 2015, p. 83.

individualism, probably best epitomized in the poems of Hō Nansōrhōn (1563-1589) and in P'ansori performances.

The idea in scholarship on Korean literature that individualism and in extension modernity could only have occurred in the East once its concept was transplanted (or translated) from the West, started with Yi Kwangsu and like-minded intellectuals from the late 19th and early 20th century. Their writings helped to create the illusion of a clear break, a radical change that was important to them in order to jumpstart their societies and bring development to their country. That the creation of such a break was troublesome is shown in the heated discussions that Korean intellectuals pursued in the definition of literature and what (if at all) distinguished the new concept of *munhak* (文學) with the traditional concept *mun* (文). Or as Park Sangjin has said:

It is interesting to note that Korean writers, while importing the concept of “literature,” that was still obscure even in the West, were troubled by how it could be harmonized with the concept of “mun” which includes all human intellectual activities in East Asia’s traditions, and their problem could not be resolved by reference to a clearly established concept of literature in the West. (...) even in the West “literature” had been used from an aspect that mixed both pre-modern and modern implications, (and from this) we can infer that Yi Kwang-Su’s attempt to define literature could not be pursued with reference to the West’s concept (which in East Asia was mistakenly perceived as being clearly established), nor by equating it with the traditional East Asian concept of “mun”.¹²

The Functionality of the Concept of Individualism

Individualism proved to be a useful tool in the hands of the intellectuals to criticize tradition. This was also the case in China. As Lydia Liu has argued: “Modern Chinese writers were immediately attracted to the idea of the individual, because it allowed them to devise a dialogic language with which to attack tradition on behalf of the individual.”¹³ Lu Xun, who is widely regarded as the father of modern Chinese literature, advocated a new literature that would emphasize individualism and emulate the rebellious spirit of Byron and Shelley. Zhou Zuoren argued in his essay “Ren de wenxue” [人的文學 Literature for humans: 1918] that the guiding principle for modern literature should be sought in humanism. Humanism was defined by him to mean a “subject-centered individualism (個人主義 *geren zhuyi*).” Zhou contended that classical Chinese literature failed to live up to humanistic goals and must therefore be discarded.¹⁴ The concept of individuality and the claim that this was missing or suppressed in earlier times came to epitomize the meaning of modernity and became a privileged site for the contest over the meaning of modernity.¹⁵

The concept of the individual was not just merely used by intellectuals to create an imagined break with tradition. The intellectuals saw the concept as an important and indispensable tool in the creation a collectivist identity and to put the individual in the larger

¹² Park, Sangjin. *A Comparative Study of Korean Literature*, p. 8.

¹³ Liu, Lydia. “Narratives of Modern Selfhood: First-Person Fiction in May Fourth Literature” in Liu, Kang and Tang, Xiaobing (eds.), *Politics, Ideology, and Literary Discourse in Modern China*. Duke University Press, 1993, p. 103-104.

¹⁴ Liu, “Narratives of Modern Selfhood”, p. 103.

¹⁵ That the idea of the concept of individualism being of alien origin is still prevalent can be seen on the online Chinese encyclopedia Baidu where the entry for individualism (个人主义) reads: “个人主义起源于西方...” (The origins of individualism lie in the West...).

conceptual framework of the nation. This is also argued by Lydia Liu in the following manner:

If the contest over the meaning of modernity in May Fourth literature came to focus on the question of self [...], it did so because the production of new ideologies and symbolic systems required a massive reconstruction of subjectivity. In other words, the subject must be “interpellated” to legitimate and reify ideologies and be called into position by specific historical discourses. It is not surprising that nearly all the debates on modern literature during the 1920s and 1930s converged on the question of the self within the larger conceptual framework of the nation.¹⁶

Moving this argument to the Korean peninsula, we certainly see that the aims of intellectuals like Yi Kwangsu and Ch’oe Namsŏn were of a very similar nature. In both his essays on literature, Yi Kwangsu repeatedly argues that the development of literature will be pivotal in helping to develop the nation. In “The Value of Literature” he says that: “the rise and fall of one nation depends on its people’s ability to uphold ideals and thoughts (...) It is literature that nurtures our ideals and thoughts.”¹⁷ Yi Kwangsu saw literature as the spiritual embodiment of the nation, and defined the task of literature as to preserve the nation and ensure its survival.

The concept of individualism was therefore seen by Yi Kwangsu, just as the Chinese intellectuals did, as the most important component in bringing about the idea of the collective nation. In his novel *The Heartless* (*Mujŏng*) he described this relation of the individual vis-à-vis the nation as follows: “Hyŏng-sik believed that while all human beings were the same by nature, an individual or society could be improved and uplifted with the effort of that society or individual. The women, however, believed that humans had no responsibility for what happened in life. Human beings just lived life as it happened, with no improvement or reform through human will. This is how Koreans view life!”¹⁸ Individuality should therefore have a clear function in that it should tie the individual to the collective nation, and the efforts of an individual should be to not only improve oneself, but also to benefit the nation.

Yi Kwangsu’s theory on literature and his works show that he had a specific didactic function of literature in mind in which the individual came to the realization to come to see itself as part of a collective and to act in accordance to the needs and benefits of the collective. This is ironically (but maybe not surprisingly) not much different from the attempts found in the Chosŏn period, where its Yangban intellectuals sought to spread the Confucian ideology to the masses. The 1434 *Samganghaengsildo* (Illustrated Guide to the Three Relationships, 三綱行實圖) and its later reincarnations being a prime example of these efforts. The didactic nature that was propagated by the authors of early modern Korean literature has a close

¹⁶ Liu, p. 104.

¹⁷ Yi, p. 291. In “What is Literature?” Yi phrases the importance of literature and literature as the embodiment of the spirit of the nation as follows: “the most effective means to transmit this spiritual civilization is the literature of the people. If the people of a country lack literature, or if they merely transmit their cultural achievements orally, then no matter how lengthy their history, their culture will lack richness, and they will be stuck in a barbaric and primitive state.” (p. 301)

¹⁸ Lee, Ann Sung-Hi. *Yi Kwang-su and Modern Korean Literature, Mujŏng*. Cornell University, 2003, p. 209. Ch’oe Namsŏn’s poem “From the Sea to Children” has been seen by Korean scholars as having had a similar aim in that it is a “combination of modern individualism with aesthetic imagery, which gives a poetic portrayal of a hopeful future for the nation.” <http://www.seelotus.com/gojeon/hyeon-dae/si/sijagpum/jagpum/cha/choinamsun-haegeseo.htm> (last visited 10 April, 2018)

relation to such earlier attempts to create a collective ideology/identity within society and shows how a distinction between a pre-modern and modern period is a complicated matter.

Towards another Perspective

It may seem like a contradiction, but in a complete upheaval of the collectivism = pre-modern vs. individuality = modern distinction, one could easily argue for the opposite: individuality came to be seen as a problem by intellectuals in that it hampered people from forming a sense of feeling part of the nation.¹⁹ The emphasis on individualism by Korean intellectuals from the late 19th and early 20th century may have well had the effect (and the ultimate goal may well have been) to create impersonal patterns of thinking, so that individuals would identify themselves completely with the nation. Here I borrow from the argument proposed by Anthony Giddens who explains modernity as a project to develop impersonal patterns of thinking. Michael Seth explains Giddens' idea as follows:

His ideas rest on 'disembedding' and the 'reflexive appropriation of knowledge'. Disembedding begins with the separation of time and space from place, so that time and space can be 'emptied' and standardised without regard to locality. Further disembedding is achieved through 'symbolic tokens' and 'expert systems' that require trust (with a sense of risk), not confidence. Therefore the transition from premodern to modern is the reorientation of perspectives from who and where people are to what functions, almost entirely impersonal, that people perform.²⁰

If we translate this process into the interaction between individualism and the collective, this sounds very much like a process in which individuality (that purportedly did not exist in pre-modern Korea but needed to be translated/transplanted from the West!) was stripped away and was made to follow the will of the collective. The reorientation of perspectives was in this case to make the individual follow the imagined collective of the nation.

With this in mind, I hope you will indulge me and let me end this paper on a speculative note. The rapid social changes in late 19th century society did not lead to an identity crisis that led the intellectuals to seek and "discover" individualism²¹ from the West, but, in the field of culture, led to a feeling of alienation after which its intellectuals sought ways to reconnect the individual to a different collective: that of the nation. This reorientation was necessary to give the individual a new existential meaning in a different (and larger) imagined collective. The appeal and rise of such totalizing ideologies as nationalism, fascism, communism, democracy,

¹⁹ With this statement I do not want to make it seem as if either collectivism **or** individualism existed in an alleged pre-modern or modern period.

²⁰ Seth, Michael. *Routledge Handbook of Modern Korean History*. p. 96.

²¹ Karatani Kojin argued that modern Japanese literature started because of the artists' discovery of "interiority". This concept has also been applied to Yi Kwangsu's early works with and his views on literature by Michael Shin in his article "Interior Landscapes: Yi Kwangsu's "The Heartless" and the Origins of Modern Literature" in Robinson, Michael and Shin, Gi-Wook (eds.), *Colonial Modernity in Korea*, Harvard University Asia Center, 2001. Interiority, however, should also be seen as a derivative of the concept of individuality and has been explained by Karatani Kojin and Michael Shin as a rhetorical strategy that helped to argue for the emergence of the 'modern self'. An interesting discussion on debates in Japanese literature surrounding the concept of interiority and how it dismantles a pre-modern/modern divide, see Keith, Vincent, "Sex on the Mind: Queer Theory Meets Cognitive Theory" in Zunshine, Lisa (ed.). *The Oxford Handbook of Cognitive Literary Studies*. Oxford University Press, 2015, in particular pp. 204-209.

etc. who all assigned a specific role for the individual in society and thereby gave it meaning, may then be explained as a means to quell the “modern” feeling of alienation.

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