

**Yang Yoon Sun, *From Domestic Women to Sensitive Young Men: Translating the Individual in Early Colonial Korea*.
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Michael Buckalew

Pacific Forum, Young Leaders Program

From Domestic Women to Sensitive Young Men: Translating the Individual in Early Colonial Korea by Yang Yoon Sun¹⁾ analyzes Korean fictional novels published during the early period of Japanese colonial rule (Yang 2017, 2). According to Yang, these years cover a transitional period in which Korean literature changed to a form more familiar to modern readers. The focus of Yang's analysis are novels with female protagonists and sensitive young men grappling with struggles published during the final years of the *Josŏn*²⁾ dynasty following the end of the Russo-Japanese War (1904-05) and the establishment of the Japanese colonial protectorate over the Korean Peninsula in 1910.

First, Yang chose four primary research questions to structure her analysis around:

1) "How do Korean literary characters function as translations of new notions of subjectivity?"

1) For Asian names, this paper follows regional convention with the family name followed by one's given name, unless otherwise quoted in source materials. Western names will provide a person's given name followed by their family name.

2) Japanese sources commonly Romanize this as 'Chosen' and some English sources use 'Choson / Choseon'. For consistency with the McCune-Reischauer system of Korean Romanization *Josŏn* will be used instead.

- 2) How did the literary translations of the individual change over this period?
- 3) What might have caused one type of iteration of the individual to be more prevalent than others in a given time?
- 4) What historical and cultural components came into play in different iterations of the individual? (Yang 2017, 5-7)

The work begins with an introduction of the topic, time period and scope of coverage, the research questions and methodology to be followed. Chapters 1-4 looks at the ways in which women were translated as individuals within “...early colonial campaigns for women’s education, egalitarian marriage, remarriage by widows, and the abolition of child marriage” (Yang 2017, 16). Chapter 5 correspondingly focuses on the internal struggles of young men coming to terms with being powerless, social outcasts. The body of *Domestic Women and Sensitive Young Men* functions as a series of book reviews. Some of the stories often adapt older materials, while others turn their lens to contemporary settings and places in early colonial Korea.

The first author’s work that Yang references from this period is *The Heartless* (*Mujöng*³⁾) by Yi Kwangsu. She argues that Yi Kwangsu’s⁴⁾ writing style is adapted to a more modern and individualistic culture than his predecessors and accordingly represents a change in Korean literary style and that *The Heartless* (1917) represents ‘the first modern Korean novel’ (Yang 2017, 1) because of Ri Hyöngshik’s quest for self-discovery. This contrasts with others in this field who argued that such a transition occurred sometime later.

Yang’s work attempts to fill in several perceived gaps in previous studies of Korean literature in this period. First, Yang argues that following teleological and Eurocentric paradigms in previous studies “...runs the risk of reading the entire archive of Korean literature [in this period] as a series of failed or successful attempts to imitate European examples.” (Yang 2017, 5) Previous scholarship with the framing of ‘domestic women’ to ‘sensitive young men’, as representing the past and future respectively (Yang 2017, 7). In contrast, Yang argues that the

3) Korean words or titles will be in italics for clarify and emphasis.

4) Korean names, unless directly quoted, will be presented in line with traditional custom: with the family name followed by given name unless ordered otherwise in a quote or direct citation.

picture is more complicated than that.

Rather than being a product of the past, she emphasizes that ‘New Woman’ figures in ‘the new novel’ (*sinsosöl*) “..become suitable modern wives for reform-minded men by pursuing a degree in a modern school, advocating scientific and rational thinking in place of superstition...” and rejecting archaic practices such as child marriage and arranged marriage (2017, 6). Education in this context was moving away from traditional Confucian learning and ideals towards Western-style study in Japan and the West (Yang 2017, 32). The novels assessed by Yang focus on empirical and social science topics and were clearly targeted towards elites or those aspiring to be in that social class (Yang 2017, 34).

Yang claims several contributions to scholarly discourse regarding Korean novels in the early 20th century. First, she suggests that a group of female figures in novels translated a more modern concept of the individual prior to that of the deep-thinking male intellectual, which was seen as the archetype of individuality in Korea (Yang 2017, 179). Prior scholarship in contrast suggested that this process took place closer to the end of the 1910s and during the period of Japanese ‘Cultural Rule’ in the 1920s. Also, for stories such as *The Heartless* (*Mujǒng*), an alternative reading of the story posits the stumbling attempts of Hyǒngsik to become a man in a changing Korea (Yang 2017, 181).

In Chapter 1, *Tears of Blood* (*Hyǒl ũ nu*, 1906), focuses on a mother-daughter relationship of a family separated by P’yǒngyang battles during the Sino-Japanese War (1894-95). This is intended to represent the disintegration of the pre-modern Korean family. (Yang 2017, 43). The mother Chun’ae represents the traditional Yangban Confucian values of Josǒn Korea, while her daughter is a woman in transformation as a modern individual. Yang interprets the story as being split into two different genres: “...the domestic novel, follow[ing] a young girl’s growth into a modern wife in accordance with a pattern of a coming-of-age story...[and]...the other rewrites the traditional biography of a virtuous woman...” (2017, 45). Yang compares *Tears of Blood* (*Hyǒl ũ nu*) to Jane Austin’s *Pride and Prejudice* and Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre* (2017, 39).

Furthermore, she suggests that the novel’s author, Yi Injik may have been more nationalistic than he is often depicted in both North and South Korea (Yang 2017,

46). She argues that *Tears of Blood* should be classified as a domestic novel to “...reclaim it as the first work of an epoch-making genre, in which modern individuality was articulated through the issues of women’s education and modern conjugal marriage” (Yang 2017, 48). One of the characters in that novel, Kim Kwanil argued that, “Korea lost its diplomatic sovereignty not because of imperialist expansion but because of its own shortcomings—its incapacity to fulfill the idea of ‘civilization and enlightenment’” (Yang 2017, 65). This perspective blames the victims of external aggression for their own downfall. This is highlighted in the context of the Kabo Reforms (1894-96), which outlawed traditional practices such as early marriage, slavery and the traditional hereditary class system (Yang 2017, 52). Such practices were interpreted as limiting the potential of Josŏn to be prosperous and resist foreign domination.

Chapter 2 discusses Yi Injik and Kim Kyoje’s two volume work, *Mt. Ch’iak* (*Ch’iaksan*, 1908, 1911) adapts “The Tale of Changhwa and Hongnyŏn,” a story of female ghosts from prior Chinese and Korean works from the 17th and early 19th centuries. The story of *Mt. Ch’iak* (*Ch’iaksan*) focused on a reform-minded woman defying the abuses of her traditional in-laws. In this story, a local government official’s two daughters were executed due to the machinations of their step-mother and return to seek justice as ghosts. The use of female ghosts was “...a culturally sanctioned literary device that offered some imaginative leeway for women to speak out against oppressive gender norms.” (Yang 2017, 40). This narrative element initially survived the transition to the early colonial period in Korea (Yang 2017, 68). Additionally, rather than criticizing a form of familial honor-killing the ghost of the two daughters focus on proving Changhwa’s chastity in accordance with Confucian norms (Yang 2017, 72). Their efforts resulted in Changhwa’s father being punished rather than executed.

Concurrently, a relatively new narrative element in Korean literature was the of the Yangban, Hong Ch’ŏlshik’s wife in Volume 2: *Madame Yi*. She differed from her contemporaries, contributing indirectly to reform movements rather than being purely a symbol of the past (Yang 2017, 80). Yang criticizes the author Yi Injik’s portrayal of *Madam Yi* as contradictory. She is used to transmit reformist ideas but is still bound by traditional gender roles and family obligations (2017, 81).

Chapter 3 covers two stories of “Femme Fatales” in *A Coldhearted Flower* (Pak ch’ōng hwa, 1910) and *Peony Hill* (Moranbong, 1913). *A Coldhearted Flower* was serialized in vernacular in a short-lived newspaper *Taehan Minbo* (People’s Daily of Great Korea, 1909-10) (Yang 2017, 98). Both stories focused on femme fatales who transgressed gender and land status boundaries (Yang 2017, 40) and undermined the authority of yangban patriarchy in favor of new moral values (Yang 2017, 97). The three main characters are: a concubine in her twenties, Major Pak (her husband), and a lovesick steward. The concubine sees herself as a sexual being and is immersed in an early form of consumer culture (Yang 2017, 100). A frequent interpretation of the individual in this period is being selfish and going against the common good. Yang emphasizes how even in these stories how male reformists try to control the translation of “the individual” as they see fit. (Yang 2017, 101). Additionally, Major Pak’s pardon of and inability to stop his concubine’s adultery shows that Confucian morality has become irrelevant (Yang 2017, 107).

Peony Hill (Moranbong, 1913) serves as the sequel to *A Coldhearted Flower*. Here Yang, references Benedict Anderson’s theory of ‘imagined communities’ to reference the background of the story. However, the community is “colonial” as the former value system has collapsed but a new one has not formed yet (Yang 2017, 116-117). The main character Sō Sukcha, one of the characters in the story is an agent of nation-building, while being anti-reformist in her efforts (Yang 2017, 116). Sō entices and educated reformist woman Kim Ongnyōn into marrying a rich playboy Sō Ilsun.

One of the more interesting points of analysis touched on by Yang for these two stories is consideration of the influence of Japanese censorship on author’s during this period. Korean literature of this period was written as much for Japanese censors as Korean audiences (Yang 2017, 119). As mentioned previously Yi Injik as a literary figure from this period can be considered contradictory. He is widely considered to have been supportive of Japan’s colonization of Korea, while promoting domestic reforms. What is unclear and merits further discussion is which analytical lenses to apply to his work. In the original context and legal regime under which his work was published, Yi may have pushed the boundaries

as much as he thought possible. In contrast, from a Korean nationalist and anti-colonial lens he is arguably at best an apologist for Japanese colonization if not a traitor to the Korean people.

The next story, *Flowers in the Mirror* (Kyōngchunghwa, 1923), by Kim Kyoje looks at Sapphic (female desire-directed) marriage and ‘Radical Domesticity’ among female protagonists trying to claim their place in a modernizing Korea. It might be the most socially radical story analyzed among Yang’s selections. The two protagonists are women who choose to exercise rights through a same-sex relationship in response to poor treatment by their families (Yang 2017, 40-41, 124). The two women who were divorced from the same man entered a bond of “sisterly love”, rejecting for a time the commonly prescribed roles of women as wives, daughter, daughters-in-law, and mothers (Yang 2017, 213). To keep within the bounds of Confucian norms, their partnership turns out to be heterosexual love by proxy as the two women they were reborn as a husband and wife (Yang 2017, 144).

For context, *Flowers in the Mirror* was published during the early stages of Japanese ‘Cultural Rule’ in the 1920s following the mass protests of the ‘March First Movement’ in 1919. This period saw relatively relaxed censorship and allowed for greater use of Hangŭl (Korean writing) in newspapers and books. Concurrently the period of the *Sinyōja* (the New Woman) was in force (Yang 2017, 126). It was also during this period that Henrik Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* was translated as *Nora* into Korean.

Chapter 5 shifts the focus to Sensitive Young Men. The protagonists of these stories were “[t]ypically marked by negative emotions—including distress, sadness, fear, despair and guilt—the figures of young men try to come to grips with their physical illnesses...and other inexplicable agonies.” (Yang 2017, 149). In “Confession under the Moon” (*Wōrha ūi ch’abaek*, 1907) by Chang Eungjin, a Yangban man confessed of his sins and failure to the nation prior to suicide. The story is interpreted as being symbolic of the death of Korea as a nation and traditional society. (Yang 2017, 41, 149). Here the old man’s death represents the end of a chapter of Korean history and the depravity of customs from the *Josōn* period.

Other stories in this vein such as Hyŏn Sangyun's "Persecution" and Yang Kŏnsik's "Sad Contradictions" looked at the feelings of disempowered young men from the first-person perspective. These men struggled to come to grips with suffering and challenges with the collapse of the traditional social structure that accompanied colonization by Japan. In both stories Na (I, in first person informal), is a self-critical young man. In the former story Na feels the gaze and criticism of others, such as his father's tenant farmers (Yang 2017, 159). In "Sad Contradictions" Na's frustrations well up from the failure to live up to the ideals of modern civilization (Yang 2017, 175). Responding to the collapse of Josŏn and Confucian social order differed greatly between men and women. For domestic women the path is clear: depart from old ways. However, for their male counterparts the answer is murky and fraught with negative emotions (Yang 2017, 176).

Overall, Yang clearly demonstrates a depth and breadth of her subject area. The research questions she poses are well designed to elicit an advanced discussion and analysis of early 20th century Korean literature. Additionally, the introduction to the book shows a comprehensive knowledge of the existing literature from various traditions. This includes European traditions back to St. Augustine's Confessions (Yang 2017, 8), and Japanese writers including Yanabu Akira and Fukuzawa Yukichi (Yang 2017, 9). This provides a grounding for readers already familiar with some Western and Japanese literature to approach the topic. Also, it demonstrates similarities and contrasts with the Korean writers of this period as they grappled with a rapidly changing social and political context.

Another strong point for this work is that Yang consistently ensures that key terms are operationalized and applied throughout her work. One example of that is the word 'individual.' For the novels she analyzes in a literary context, Yang look at Chinese, English, Japanese and Korean translations for 'individual' (Yang 2017, 9). According to Yang's analysis early colonial Korean translations of the individual could refer to: 1) an agent of universal human rights, 2) a specific group in a national community and, 3) a rational man pursuing his own self-interest (Yang 2017, 13). Alternative definitions also included an individual as "a person who 'surmount[s] the limits of an assigned social position'" in reference to

Keomhong, a character in *Mt. Ch'iak* (Yang 2017, 89). Finally, "In early colonial Korea, living according to the principle of 'individualism' was often 'translated' as the selfish act of putting one's own interest ahead of that of the community" (Yang 2017, 96). In *A Coldhearted Flower*, the concubine was referred to as a negative example of individualism (*gaeinjuŭija*) along these lines.

Along with the concept of the individual, 'home' as an idea also is defined from similar linguistic sources. It is translated as "kajŏng" or home from the transliteration of *katei* via a Chinese trying to capture the Victorian concept of "home". (Yang 2017, 60). This provides some more accessibility for English language readers, particularly who may have a background with other Asian history and literature of late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Yang also provided the historical context of real-world events surrounding the novels how particular stories and narrative features in them developed. One clear instance of this was in *Mt. Ch'iak*. The *Tale of Changhwa and Hongnyŏn*, which served as the basis for *Mt. Ch'iak* had more than fifty versions spanning over several centuries in retelling (Yang 2017, 70-71).

In Chapter 3, Yang also contextualized the female protagonists of *A Coldhearted Flower* and *Peony Hill* with historical research on 16th century *Josŏn* legal code on adultery based on gender and social class to contextualize a story (Yang 2017, 103). Details such as this are critical to lowering the barrier to entry for non-Korean speaking readers and those lacking deep familiarity with pre-modern Korean customs.

One gap in Yang's analysis is related to Japanese cultural transmission to Korea during the colonial period. Yang mentions Japanese writers in her literature review and touches on political and social dislocations caused in Korea by colonization. What is missing however, is a discussion of cultural shifts brought about as a byproduct of Japanese colonialization or that occur concurrently by not directly related to it. To be clear, this is not to qualify Japanese colonization in terms such as 'positive' or 'negative'. Instead modernization, ushered largely under the auspices of Japanese colonial rule resulted in cultural shifts that were not limited to Korea, but were part of broader cultural trends occurring in Japan and many nations in the West.

This could be ascribed to sensitivities of Korean researchers and at-large of even incidentally ascribing any neutral or even positive evaluations of Japanese colonialism. One example of this was Yang's discussions on the Sinyōja (the New Woman) (Yang 2017, 126). This movement in Korea coincided with and arguably was predated by the trend of the "Moga"⁵⁾ trend in Japan during the Taisho Era (1912-1926) following World War One. This was contemporary to analogous movements in the United States and Europe with the expansion voting and social rights. Thus, rather than being a trend isolated in Korea, the Sinyōja of the 1920s could instead be viewed as part of a larger trend, and one with a more direct form of cultural influence and transmission from Japan.

This also leads to an area of potential comparison between Yang's concept of 'Domestic Women' with the Japanese concept of the '*Poison Woman*' (Marran 2007) for future scholars. Yang touches on the concept of unbridled individualism among women in stories such as *A Coldhearted Flower* and *Peony Hill* (2017, 97). However, it could well merit further discourse in comparison with Japanese female literary figures. The *Poison Woman* is a sexually empowered woman who often killed her lovers, was a concept was present in Japanese literary discourse going back to the Edo Period (1615-1867) and was recurrent through the post-1868 period as well.

An additional idea *From Domestic Women to Sensitive Young Men*, which could be expanded upon is looking at works from this era through a gender or queer studies lens. A clear example of this was Yang's analysis of *Flowers in the Mirror*. This story focused on two female protagonists exercising greater social rights through a same-sex relationship (Yang 2017, 40-41). Yang touches on this point only briefly referencing "...the boundary between homosocial desire and homoerotic desire often remains obscure when it comes to female intimacies..." (Yang 2017, 139). Given the volume of historical literature in pre and post-colonial Korea, literature such as this that explores traditionally non-orthodox relationships is ripe for further scholarship in South Korea. Even in 2018-19, the South Korean's on gender and sexuality are in state of transition in public opinion and discourse

5) Jp. Modern Girl. Many aspects of the 'Moga' significantly overlap with the Korean 'sinyeoja'.

(Kim et. al., 2015).⁶⁾ This view has only reached support in most Western nations only in the past decade. Accordingly, it represents an idea ripe for further analysis as Korean views on gender and sexual identity evolve.

From Domestic Women to Sensitive Young Men is undoubtedly academic and specialized in nature. To truly understand what is presented, one would at least need to have some background in the following topics: 1) literature from the Victorian Era into the early 20th century, particularly in East Asia and; Korean history, particularly from the period of 1876-1919. Lacking such a background could leave many readers viewing Yang's work inaccessible. However, if one was interested in reading the novels covered in *From Domestic Women to Sensitive Young Men*, it would represent a good analytical companion piece.

6) From 2010 to 2014 support for same-sex marriage increased from 16.9 percent in 2010 to 28.5 percent.

References

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