

# The Conflict between Progressive and Reactionary Literature on the March First People's Uprising

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## Abstract

After the March First People's Uprising, writers that included progressive patriots, independence activists and the broader masses created progressive literature that reflected the heights of the Korean people's patriotic fervor and the national anti-Japanese struggle. In contrast, bourgeois writers went down the path of becoming reactionaries as their disappointment, sense of failure, weariness and despair led them to a literary world that was at once both empty and degenerate. Unlike the progressive works that flow with our people's strong will and invincible spirit that refused to surrender in the face of guns and knives and gave them the strong resolve to achieve independence for their country, these corrupted literary works were reactionary in the sense that they emphasized feelings of depression, despair and pessimism in their portrayal of human beings faced with misfortune. These works, which reflect historical fact but are in sharp contrast to the *Chuch'e* ideological direction, portrayal of art and characters, and description of life in both content and convention, show how sharp and complicated the confrontation between progressive and reactionary literature was in our country's modern literary world in the time leading up to and following the March First People's Uprising.

Keywords: March First People's Uprising, Progressive Literature, Reactionary Literature, Independence, Patriotism, *Chuch'e*

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Received July 1, 2018; Revised version received September 3, 2018; Accepted March 1, 2019

## 1. Introduction

Etched into Korea's modern history is the bloody story of the March First People's Uprising. This event saw our people rise up in a national struggle against the Japanese empire's savage militaristic politics of suppression, proudly displaying the invincible and fiery nationalist spirit of the Korean people and their refusal to live as colonial slaves.

Great Leader (*Suryong*) Comrade Kim Il Sung provided us with the following teaching:

March 1, 1919 is when our people cried out "Out with the Japanese and their army" and "Hurrah for Korea's independence" and started a national struggle in opposition to the Japanese imperialist thieves. It was also the day our people struck back strongly against the Japanese imperialists. This day witnessed the spilling of our people's precious blood to achieve their freedom. (*Kim Il Sung Works*, Volume 3, 185)

Millions of people headed out to the streets and spilt blood of patriotism on that day with the common aim of taking back their country. With cries for independence, the spirit of struggle and the fervor of that day shook the misfortune-draped motherland and left a deep impression in the hearts of the Korean people. What happened that day created a need for literary works that would raise the power of its ideological and emotional impact. Progressive writers of conscience who had directly participated in the struggle right after the March First People's Uprising, or who had witnessed the street-filled struggle of the protestors—along with the savage oppression and atrocities committed by the Japanese imperialists—created progressive works that reflected the invincible spirit of our people's struggle while exposing the brutal nature and savagery of the Japanese imperialists.

In contrast, bourgeois writers failed to register our people's elevated patriotic fervor and passionate volition to achieve independence in their street protests against the Japanese imperialists. These writers recoiled in fear at the sight of the savage crackdowns and fascist-like oppression of the Japanese imperialists toward

the protestors. The ultimate surrender to their ideological wavering led to the creation of degenerate works that simply expressed these writers' pessimism, depravity, disappointment and sense of failure. These works extinguished the fire of the Korean people's anti-Japanese struggle and corrupted the literary world. There thus exists a sharp conflict between progressive and reactionary literature written about the historical realities of the March First People's Uprising.

## 2. March First People's Uprising in Progressive Literature

Progressive works that reflect the March First Movement include the poems "March First" (Kim Yöche, 1920), "Oh, oh, Freedom" (Kim Yöche, 1920), "Ah, ah, My Country" (Hae Il, 1920), "A New Light" (Ryu Yöng, 1920), and "The Girl with Cut Off Arms" (Yi Kwang-su, 1920); the songs from the period of enlightenment that include "Ode to the Yalu River," "Song Commemorating March First," "Marching Song of March First," "Song of the March First Movement," the "Song of the Independence Movement," and Kim Sowöl's short-story "Snowflakes" (1922). These works proactively encouraged the patriotic struggle and volition for independence among our people.

With the exception of Kim Sowöl's short-story, almost all of the poems and songs were published domestically and abroad or passed down orally. These works were generally created by independence activists or patriots working abroad, or other people among the masses who either participated in the March First Movement or witnessed it.

These poems were published after the Japanese imperialists announced their "Cultural Rule," which was aimed at quieting the Korean people's anti-Japanese sentiment following the massive shock of the March First People's Uprising; yet, the Japanese imperialists still continued to savagely suppress progressive media and publishing activities for fear that their cruel suppression of unarmed protestors would widely become known. Just as one cannot fully conceal a knife under one's clothes, the Japanese imperialists were ultimately unable to fully veil their crimes: Patriots who deplored the misfortune that had befallen our people published articles

and other works about the March First People's Uprising in various domestic and foreign outlets.

The differences in poetic talent and the contrasting aesthetic feeling expressed by poets about the March First People's Uprising created different lyrical structures and a wide range of poetic sentiment; nonetheless, the poems are all united by the strong aspiration to achieve the independence of our country at all costs, along with the fiery, indomitable spirit that refuses to surrender to the Japanese imperialists. The ideological and sentimental characteristics of this period's poetry are defined by the hatred and dissent toward the Japanese imperialists who forced the fate of colonial slavery upon our people; the national sadness and pain of having our country stolen; and the noble, ardent ideological feelings aimed at achieving the liberation of the country that pulse through the veins of our people.

These poems genuinely express the far-reaching spirit and fighting will of our people, along with their invincible spirit of refusal to surrender in the face of the enemy's bayonets. The people's songs created about the March First People's Uprising directly reflect the ideological emotions of the masses who took part in the uprising in both their strong impact on mobilizing the people and the strong emotional current that runs through them.

Comrades, bravely rise up  
 Though weaponless, we won't be afraid  
 Where the future of the fighters for justice shines bright  
 We will easily win against the mass of enemy soldiers  
 "Song of the Independence Movement"<sup>1)</sup>

Korea's independence has arrived, yes, it's arrived!  
 Stifled for ten years, it's now arrived!  
 The twenty million souls of our entire beautiful nation  
 Are alive, yes, they are alive! At this we call out:  
 Hurrah for independence, and hurrah for Korea!  
 "Song of the Independence Movement"<sup>2)</sup>

1) *Hangilgayo min kit'a* [Protest Songs and Other Songs] (Bogosa, 2007), 338.

2) *Ibid.*, 337.

The song calls out for independence and expresses the pent-up battle spirit and will of the protestors in the anti-Japanese uprising. The lyrics express the overflowing sense of optimism and assuredness that will lead the “mass of enemy soldiers” to lose their fighting spirit and that “the twenty million people of our country” will undoubtedly experience the coming of Korea’s independence. The song also reflects the patriotic spirit of the unarmed protestors who went up against the bayonets of the Japanese imperialists, and elegantly expresses their justifications for and devotion to the struggle for independence.

Passionately singing about the entire Korean people’s intent to take part in the fight to regain their country, the song calls for them to inherit the patriotic spirit shown by protestors who were unafraid of death in their weaponless effort to remove the shackles of slavery and achieve their country’s independence.

Ryu Yŏng’s poem, “A New Light,” shows the happiness and joy that March First represented, and calls for the Korean people to once again exhibit the invincible spirit and courage that they displayed during the March First People’s Uprising.

The first part of the poem presents March First as the “fire that lit the dark night” and “reflects the bright future” of “the new light of the sun [that] rises over the eastern mountains.”

The curtain of the dark night rises  
The new light of the sun rises over the eastern mountains  
Ah, yes, today the Korean people  
Meet this new light with glorious happiness  
May this bright future forever shine on this land  
The new light of March 1

- From the poem, “A New Light”<sup>3)</sup>

In fact, this poem was written after the Japanese imperialists’ cruel suppression and the toadyism and nationally ruinous actions of the bourgeois leadership had

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3) *Tongnipshinmun* [The Independent], March 3, 1920.

caused the March First People's Uprising to end in failure. The poet, however, wrote that March First "gave this land eternal happiness" and provided "perpetual freedom to its descendants." Why, then, did the poet view March First as a day of joy that "reflected the [country's] bright future" and "glorious happiness"?

The poet portrays the Korean people as refusing to surrender to the bayonets of the Japanese imperialists and instead put fear into their hearts by calling out "Cut off my arms and my legs!" along with "cries for freedom paid for by red blood" and "fire-like courage" that occurred "until [their] last moments of life." Through this imagery, the poet proudly displays the fiery patriotic and invincible spirit of the Korean people to the entire world. Through this ideologically-driven emotion, the lyrical protagonist cries out for our people's freedom and independence; moreover, by defining their brave street protests as a "new light reflecting a bright future," and likening the day to one that elicited a great sense of pride and happiness, the poem expresses certainty that the invincible spirit and strong will of the Korean people—who are unafraid of death and sacrifice in the struggle to take back their country—will end the misfortune of national degeneration and lead to the new dawn of Korea's independence.

The works of this period portray the hatred toward the Japanese invaders and the cruel suppression of protestors who risked their own lives in the struggle for the independence of their country.

The poem "March First" was written outside of Korea on the first anniversary of the uprising. Kim Yöche, who showed extraordinary talent in writing *shinch'eshi* [new-style poetry] during his time studying in Japan after his graduation from Osan High School, sought exile in Shanghai after the March First People's Uprising and published the poem "March First" and "Oh, oh Freedom" during the period of the independence movement.

The descriptive world of "March First" shows the complicated feelings of the lyrical protagonist who, upon greeting the one-year anniversary of the "noble battle" to achieve national independence, cannot forget the "lonely spirits underground" and the "brave souls behind jail bars," while consistently expressing the heroic resolve and determination that "even ten million deaths will not stop independence from being achieved."

As the lyrical protagonist greets the one-year anniversary of the March First People's Uprising while abroad, the tragic panorama of "the thousands" of innocent people "on that day" who were felled by "Japanese knives and bullets," creating a terrible mountain of blood and tears, is etched into his heart as an unhealable wound. When he closes his eyes, he cannot help but "see his younger brother walking crippled" and the image of his "older sister being dragged away." The poem genuinely recreates the painful feelings experienced by the lyrical protagonist who, "under the yoke of bitter slavery," is unable to sleep at night because his mind remains restless due to the terrible images of that day of "tension, cruel punishment and abuse." While enduring the misfortune and pain suffered by our people abroad, his hatred toward the Japanese imperialists surges in his chest. He is overtaken by a resolve and desire to overthrow colonial rule at any cost to bring about the day when the "sun rays of freedom and the flag of justice [sheds] new luster." He expresses certainty that Korea's independence will be achieved.

Even ten million deaths will not prevent independence from being achieved  
Even the obstruction of the heavens and earth will not prevent independence from coming  
Even if the entire nation is floating above the blood of our people and the entire people fail to survive  
Independence will most definitely be achieved, yes it will!<sup>4)</sup>

The poet elegantly extols that the country's independence will surely come about when the "chest beats with blood of true intentions" and the "blood of freedom flowing through one's forearms" is shed, and ardently calls for the entire Korean people to devote their lives to the battle of taking back their country. The poem uses this imagery to show how high the cost is of unhesitatingly contributing one's precious blood for the freedom and independence of our people, who are suffering under the tyranny of the Japanese imperialists, and emphasizes that independence will be achieved when the entirety of the Korean people—male, female, young

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4) *Tongnipshinmun* [The Independent], March 1, 1920; Cho Pyōngch'un, *Han'guk'yōndaeshisa* [The History of Modern Korean Poetry] (Sōngmundang, 1980), 50-51.

and old alike—participate in the struggle to achieve liberation of the country by following in their footsteps.

Another poem, the “Girl with Cut Off Arms,” portrays the patriotic protest of a young female student who loses both of her arms to the knives of the Japanese imperialists when she holds the flag and loudly cries out for Korea’s independence. This scene both exposes and criticizes the savage brutality inherent in the bloody suppression by the Japanese imperialists of the Korean people’s patriotic protests.

Hurrah, hurrah!

As the poor, pretty young girl cries out

The Japanese soldier’s knife cuts into her pale arms

Hurrah, hurrah!

As the poor, pretty young girl cries out

The stream of fresh blood shines on the mountains and rivers

Hurrah, hurrah!

Cut by the knife of a Japanese soldier, the lotus-like lips of the young girl cry out

Hurrah, hurrah!

The dark day sheds light on the compatriots of the blood-drenched girl

The flag in the clutches of her forearms lying on the ground<sup>5)</sup>

This poem was published abroad in the *Tongnipshinmun* [The Independent] by Yi Kwang-su a year after the end of the March First People’s Uprising. As part of his proactive assistance to implementing the colonial policies of the Japanese imperialists, Yi published “On National Renovation” (1922) and “The Revolutionary’s Wife” (1930) that criticized our people’s national character and severely insulted our revolutionaries. However, on the eve of the March First Movement, Yi participated in the independence movement and conducted progressive literary activities that contributed to the development of modern literature to a certain extent.

The “Girl with Cut Off Arms” displays the patriotic protest of a young female

5) *Tongnipshinmun* [The Independent], June 1, 1920.



student who loses both of her arms to the knives of the Japanese imperialists while holding the flag and crying out loudly for Korea's independence. This scene both exposes and criticizes the savage brutality of the Japanese imperialists, who engage in bloody suppression of the patriotic protests of the Korean people struggling to liberate their country from colonialism.

The poem portrays a serious confrontation between Japanese bastards wielding knives and a young girl who marches steadily and unhesitatingly forward while holding a flag; this scene clearly shows how frighteningly explosive the long-accumulated anger of our people can be given their long survival under the yoke of the Japanese imperialists' colonial rule and its accompanying humiliations and abuses. The poem evokes images of a young girl standing up to these enemies of our nation, crying out for our independence in full-bodied defiance; that of sword-wielding Japanese imperialist savages who unhesitatingly cut off the arms of the unarmed, delicate girl; and her bloodied forearms on the ground, the flag still in the clutches of her hands.

Through its historically factual, vivid imagery of the fight against the Japanese imperialist bastards along with the calls by the protestors for the independence of Korea until their last breaths, the poem captures the patriotism of the Korean people in their attempt to achieve the independence of their country. In tandem, the poem emphasizes the idea that no degree of savage oppression by the Japanese imperialists can weaken the invincible fighting spirit of the sagacious and courageous Korean people. The poem exposes the brutality of the Japanese imperialists in their savage suppression of protesters in the March First People's Uprising and clearly shows, above all else, the evil and savage nature of these bastards. Furthermore, the poem clearly shows that the Japanese imperialists have no peers as the bitter enemies of the Korean people and are unsurpassed as the stranglers of the independence movement.

The poems from this period, as the above descriptions show, ardently display hatred toward the Japanese imperialists, who savagely suppressed and brought misfortune and pain on our people as they engaged in the struggle to achieve national independence for their country; the sacred ideological emotions of the patriotic martyrs who fearlessly accepted sacrifice to achieve their country's

independence; and the ardent desire by the people to achieve their country's independence at all costs.

Having learned a serious lesson from the failure of the uprising, the people's resolve to conduct a new heroic struggle flows throughout all the poems from this period about the Korean people's national struggle against the Japanese imperialists.

Songs created by the people to commemorate the March First People's Uprising, including the "Song of the Yalu River," the "Song Commemorating March First," the "Marching Song of March First," and the "Song of the March First Movement," genuinely show the patriotic feelings of the masses who participated in the March First People's Uprising and the serious lessons and determination acquired from its failure. Through song, these works commemorate March First as a very significant day because it was when the "entirety of the people rose up and fought bloodily" and the "light of independence" shined. The powerful thread woven throughout these songs is the ardent hope that we never forget the day that precious blood was spilt by our people for freedom and independence, and for that day's spirit of struggle to live on. While the March First Movement ended in failure, the lyrical protagonist's ardent hope is that we should not feel disappointed or let down by this failure; instead, we must energetically continue the struggle to achieve our country's independence by looking to the display of our people's noble and invincible spirit.

Despite expressing an ardent spirit of patriotism, songs about the March First People's Uprising are limited by the fact they do not go beyond expressing righteous indignation and making general appeals for continuing the struggle to liberate the country.

Some songs from this period, however, overcome these limitations and clearly reflect the Korean people's national anti-Japanese struggle and anti-Japanese, patriotic spirit.

At the young age of fourteen years old, the Great Leader (*Suryong*) Comrade Kim Il Sung touchingly promised that he would not return to Korea until its independence was achieved, and while crossing the Yalu River he sung the enlightened song, "Ode to the Yalu River." The immortal memories of one part of the noble revolutionary struggle experienced by the Great *Suryong* is etched

into the fabric of this song. This song reflects the national sadness of having to leave one's beloved hometown after the country was snatched away by the Japanese imperialist invaders and thus clearly displays anti-Japanese patriotic sentiment.

March 1, 1919  
The day my body crossed the Yalu River  
Every year on this day  
I promise to return to this land  
Only after achieving my goal<sup>6)</sup>

The determination to take back one's country along with the sadness of leaving the motherland after the Japanese imperialists took it away runs through the lyrical world of the "Ode to the Yalu River." There are many difficulties to overcome on the path to achieve that "goal," and while the road to bringing about that day seems distant and perilous, the lyrical protagonist makes a promise in his heart to achieve that sacred goal of "returning to his independent country," which is a "goal that will never be forgotten, even in death." Each line of this softly-spoken yet energetic poem pulses with the sacred ideologically-driven emotion of achieving that day through the full-bodied sacrifice for the motherland's liberation. This song is one of the period's most famous because through sentiment both tragic and heroic in nature it lucidly expresses the people's invincible volition for struggle and the aim to overcome all adversity to take back the motherland. At a basic level, other songs like the "Song Commemorating March First" and the "Song of the March First Movement," express the national sadness and tragic emotion felt by the protagonist as he crosses the Yalu River—in effect, leaving the motherland—to avoid Japanese imperialist oppression while simultaneously parting ways with the people he loves.<sup>7)</sup>

Unlike other songs that simply wail about the embarrassment of losing one's country and express the sadness of leaving one's homeland, every line of the "Ode

6) *Chosŏn morae daejŏnjip* [Anthology of Korean Songs] (Literature & Arts Publishing House, 2004), 285.

7) *Hangilgayo min kit'a* [Protest Songs and Other Songs] (Bogosa, 2007), 351.

to the Yalu River” ardently expresses the noble spirit aimed at achieving the independence of the country.

Our people’s aim to achieve the independence of the motherland can be found not just in songs but also in novels. One example is Kim Sowōl’s short-novel “Snowflakes,” which was published in the October 1922 issue of the magazine *New Dawn*.

Kim Sowōl was well-known in the Korean literary world of the 1920s for his work “Rural Poet,” which uniquely and poetically portrayed the affection and longing for his hometown and our people’s traditional national lifestyle and customs. However, he turned his attention early in his literary career to creating literary prose, and this led to the creation of the short-story “Snowflakes.”

The short-story depicts a conversation held between the protagonist Wōnsun and her younger sibling as snowflakes fall during the winter and right before Wōnsun heads to China to her husband. The short-story demonstrates the resolution and determination of [Korea’s] young people to follow in the footsteps of the independence movement’s patriotic heroes and their aim to achieve Korea’s independence.

Wōnsun’s departure from Korea to an unfamiliar and distant land is not just because of her strong, womanly love of her husband in Beijing, or to fulfill her wifely duties.

However, tonight this woman was going to cross the Yalu River into another country’s land—leaving the land of our ancestors behind—so that she could follow her husband, satisfy the intentions of her lover, and assist in the brave young [man]’s activities.

Wōnsun’s journey to her husband in Beijing went beyond the determined emotions of love toward her husband as his wife; rather, she was going there to help the “brave young [man]’s activities.” So, the question remains what her husband—the “brave young [man]”—was doing. This is not explicitly made clear in the text, but in light of her husband’s past experience and the questions posed by the writer, his “activities” were likely involved with the struggle for [Korea’s]

independence. Her husband played an important leadership role in the March First Movement, and due to this experience, he left the social science department of a Tokyo-based university he had been attending, exiled himself to China and engaged in political activities as he travelled back and forth between Shanghai and Beijing.

Wönsun thus went abroad to meet her husband and the activities she conducted with him were all related to achieving the independence of Korea.

Elder sister, let's not cry. Nothing can come from us crying, am I right? The two of you have a path you must follow. We are now trying to walk down that path, are we not? So, there is no cause for even the slightest feelings of sadness. Each person has their own path to take, and the path for the two of you has simply become clear.<sup>8)</sup>

These are the words that Wönsun's younger sibling told her as she tearfully parted ways. "The path" they were trying to walk down refers to the path of taking back the country from the Japanese imperialists and achieving Korea's independence.

This short-story does not reveal in detail about their goals and ways they engaged in the independence movement, but nonetheless shows relatively clearly that the hope for Korea's independence was forever etched deeply within the hearts of the Korean people. This demonstrates that, despite the March First Movement's failure, the invincible spirit of struggle and the passion of the Korean people to achieve independence did not falter in the slightest and, moreover, shows that the struggle to achieve Korean's independence continued on.

The works reflecting the national anti-Japanese struggle of our people following the March First People's Uprising reflect the historical fact that the Korean people sacrificed precious blood for freedom and independence. Each work is thus overflowing with strong patriotic emotions and are strongly characterized by calls for popular engagement in the struggle for independence. These works unified the people and became widely distributed amongst them. Moreover, these works

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8) *Kaebiyök* [New Dawn], October 1922; Öm Hosök, *Kimsowöllon* [On Kim Sowöl] (Korean Writers' League Publishing House, 1958), 57-60.

awakened the Korean people as a nation, raised their anti-Japanese consciousness, and contributed to creating a sense of patriotism [among them] to a certain degree.

### 3. The March First People's Uprising in Reactionary Literature

After the March First People's Uprising, writers that included progressive patriots, independence activists and the broader masses created progressive literature that reflected the heights of the Korean people's patriotic fervor and the national anti-Japanese struggle. In contrast, bourgeois writers went down the path of becoming reactionaries as their disappointment, sense of failure, weariness and despair led them to a literary world that was at once both empty and degenerate.

In the bourgeois literature of this period, works were published about the March First People's Uprising that included the short-story "Fate" (Chŏn Yŏngt'aek 1919, 12), "A Woman Drinking Poison" (Chŏn Yŏngt'aek 1921, 1) and the novella "Before the March First Movement" (Ryŏm Sangsŏp 1924, 4-6). What characterized these novels—in contrast to the progressive novels that portrayed the patriotic fervor, volition for independence and opposition to the Japanese imperialists by the Korean people—was the depressing and gloomy social realities of colonial Korea before the March First People's Uprising and the portrayal of prison life under Japanese imperialist oppression right after the uprising.

The novella *Mansejŏn*, or "Before the March First Movement," was published as an incomplete series in the magazine "New Life" under the title "Grave" from July to September 1922. The writer finished the work in 1924 and, after changing the title to "Before the March st Movement," it was published in its complete form in the newspaper *Shidaeilbo*. The beginnings of this novel thus originated in the early 1920s.

"Before the March First Movement" describes Korean society's realities right before the March First People's Uprising, when calls for independence echoed throughout the country. The novella portrays the evil nature of the Japanese imperialists and the contradictions of colonial society by objectively describing how the Japanese imperialists took away the basic freedoms and rights of the

Korean people before the outbreak of the uprising, and how they were sold like slaves for small amounts of money as Japanese capital invaded the country and took away the land and streets. The degree of anti-Japanese feeling and criticism of reality displayed by this novella ensures that this work cannot be simply equated with other general naturalism novels written by Ryōm Sangsōp and those created by other literary naturalist writers.

However, the issue with this work is that the perspective of the main protagonist (or “I”) views reality apathetically and expresses dark and depressing sentiments. While studying abroad in Japan, he receives a telegram telling him that his wife is on her deathbed. Immediately, he heads to a bar and starts drinking alcohol. A cold-hearted human being, he cracks jokes with a cafe madame he had known for the past six months. He further expresses the belief that “The death of one person has nothing to do with me drinking,” reflecting the individualistic mindset that drinking while his wife is dying is not a contradiction nor a weight on his conscience.

After his return to Korea, he meets with people in his homeland who only pretend to work for the nation. These people include Kim Ŭikwan, a petty swindler subservient to power, his archetypically conservative older brother and his obstinate father.

Facing colonial Korean's utterly stifling realities and his contempt and hatred of all those he meets, he mockingly laughs at himself and remarks, “Korea's reality is that of a tomb. A maggot-infested tomb.” While on a train, he looks around and says, “Even the inside of this [train] is a graveyard, [and] everyone's a maggot. They're maggots, I'm a maggot.”<sup>9)</sup> By condemning the depressing realities of his motherland as it unfolds in front of his eyes, the protagonist expresses both pent-up anger and dissent toward his own society—a society that, under Japanese colonial rule, is suffocating as if suffering from ginseng poisoning.

The issue, however, is how the writer of this novella faces this social reality and his perspective and standpoint toward it. Other works by critical realist writers from the same period portrayed the period's social realities from a realist

9) *Sidaeilbo*, issues April 6 to June 7, 1924; “The Rickshaw Puller,” in *Hyōndaejosōnmunhaksōnjip* [Selected Modern Korean Literature], Vol. 16 (Korean Literature & Arts Publishing House, 1988), 231-339.

perspective. Their works, however, criticized the contradictions of an exploitative society that produced a myriad of inequalities and irrationalities, and the criticism and pent-up frustrations expressed by their protagonists derived from their protagonists' inability to present a way to resolve these contradictions.

However, Ryōm's novella takes a different perspective and standpoint toward reality that is characterized by being both empty and pessimistic. The criticism and sadness expressed by the protagonist toward the period's societal realities is not an explosion of emotion derived from his tortured attempts to dig up the root cause of the society's contradictions; rather, the weak, frail protagonist just expresses criticism and pent-up anger when faced with these social contradictions, along with pessimism and a bad attitude toward his people's "inferiority." The novella simply ends with the protagonist ("I") contemplating a "graveyard-like" world.

...It's like all that surrounds me now is a graveyard. As I sit inside a tomb overrun by goblin-like existences roaming around in full daylight and white-clothed people devoid of any vitality, how could I hope to enjoy life in the 'Flower of Seoul'? All that I see and hear fails to provide my heart with relief, mollification or hope-the continuance of all this just means this maggot [will continue to] writhe in suffocation.

Approaching this period's realities pessimistically, the protagonist hesitates in front of these realities until reveling in self-defeat and an inability to relieve his depression. The depressing standpoint and sentiment of the protagonist as he faces the realities of humanity and society directly reflects the literary viewpoint and aesthetic views of Ryōm and other naturalist writers. The literary naturalism and reactionism of Ryōm and other similar writers derive from the fact that they turn their protagonists into powerless existences surrounded by uncertain and depressing circumstances and make light of their depressing, unhappy attitudes while exposing the depressing realities of the society.

Ultimately, through the writer's literary naturalistic composition and descriptions, the novella "Before the March First Movement" reflects the societal realities of



the period before the March First People's Uprising as a dark, contradiction-filled time of Japanese colonial rule; however, the novella describes the society in which these contradictions exist as a "graveyard" and a dark, suffocating world. Ultimately, these descriptions only end up eliciting a sense of failure and profanity from the protagonist. Importantly, the work fails to effectively highlight the underlying trends that ultimately allowed the accumulated popular resentment and anger toward Japanese imperialism to explode nationally through the March First People's Uprising.

The novella reflects the social realities of the time before the March First People's Uprising; Chŏn Yŏng'ae's short story "Fate" and "The Woman Drinking Poison,"<sup>10)</sup> on the other hand, reflect the depressing realities of colonial society after the uprising.

Chŏn did not participate in the March First People's Uprising, nor did he fall victim to Japanese imperialist oppression and spend time in jail. However, some of his short-stories are set in prisons and show the brutality of the Japanese imperialists' suppression of patriotic heroes who participated in the uprising.

Chŏn was likely able to compose such works because of his wife, who led a life full of difficulty. According to historical documents, Chŏn's wife participated in the uprising and was consequently arrested by the Japanese colonial police a day after her marriage ceremony. She was unable to become pregnant following the torture she received in prison. Chŏn was thus able to write stories with these twists of fate and life experience in mind that portrayed the unfortunate fate of people who suffered immensely after being arrested and taken to prison by the Japanese colonial government after the March 1st Movement. The short-stories "Fate" and "The Woman Drinking Poison" exemplified this ability and were published in the bourgeois children's magazine "Creation."

The narrative of "Fate" follows the prison and post-prison life of O Tongchun, who spends three months in prison for taking part in the *Kiminyŏn* Incident. The work provides insight into stifling prison life and the mental and physical pain and anxiety-ridden psychological state it inflicts on prisoners through its

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10) *Ch'angio* [Creation], January 1921.

descriptions of the prisons, their inmates and prison guards: The vacuum-like interior of jail cells that are so suffocating that air seems almost nonexistent; the emaciated, tired appearances of the prisoners, who, seated as if on the verge of death, are as yellow as those with stage three tuberculosis, with lips open far too wide to be normal and eyes that stare off to the distance at nothing in particular, and, moreover, are “black enough to make it uncertain whether they are African or Asian, and so emaciated that only their cheekbones are clearly visible, along with their wildly protruding facial hair and deep-set eyes”; fearsome-looking prison guards cruelly and inhumanely treat the prisoners, pushing them around like criminals.

At first glance, the short-story portrays the miserable life of the protagonist in prison and the mental pain he suffers and so it appears to be an attempt to show a glimpse of the realities of Japan’s cruel colonial rule. However, a more in-depth examination of the short-story shows that this expectation is very much off the mark.

The short-story’s protagonist enters Kyōngsōng Prison and, after being released three months later, sets out to search for his lover.

In jail, Tongchun “spends all his days sitting eyes closed in an endless daydream.” His daydreaming in prison focuses on the days he spent with his lover, the suspicions he has that his lover is cheating on him, and, later, chastisement of himself for even suspecting his lover of cheating. Released 100 days after being placed in prison, and unable to brush away suspicions that his lover is cheating on him, Tongchun heads to Japan to find her.

Some days later, however, Tongchun receives a letter from his lover that tells him she has married another man and is pregnant.<sup>11)</sup>

Through its portrayal of Tongchun’s life in prison and his wandering post-prison life, the short-story is, in essence, a depressing story of the unlucky fate and misfortune that befalls those who went to prison. The short-story’s portrayal of Tongchun’s unfortunate fate, however, suggests that the independence movement led by patriots against the Japanese colonial authorities was empty and pointless,

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11) *Ch’angio* [Creation], December 1919.

and, consequently, casts a chill over the Korean people's passionate national struggle to end Japanese colonial rule. Meanwhile, Chŏn's other short-story, "The Woman Drinking Poison," objectively describes the fate of a woman who is arrested for participating in the March First Movement and, to her great angst, loses her children during her time in prison. Alas, this short-story also arouses great feelings of anxiety and despair [amongst its readers].

These stories reflect how bourgeois writers expressed the period following the March First People's Uprising. Kim Tongin, a bourgeois writer of the time, effusively praised the short-story "Fate" by calling it "one of the best novels since the establishment of the *Korean Literary Circle*." Kim's praise shows the degenerate mental state and literary tendencies of the bourgeois writer community.

#### 4. Conclusion

Depression, anxiety, pent-up anger, sighing in unhappiness, tears, emptiness, apprehension, despair, pessimism: these expressions make up the foundation of works by bourgeois writers like Chŏn Yŏngt'aek and Ryŏm Sangsŏp, and exemplify their degenerate mindset and literary world. The bourgeois writers of the time had this degenerate mental state in common and pursued such corrupted literature because they were caught up in the disappointment, despair, pessimism and despair of the failure of the March First Movement. They feared the cruel suppression of the Japanese colonialists, and were unable to comprehend the strong will for independence and patriotism shown by our people. This ideological mentality served as the foundation for them to head further down the path of reactionism. Unlike the progressive works that flow with our people's strong will and invincible spirit that refused to surrender in the face of guns and knives and gave them the strong resolve to achieve independence for their country, these corrupted literary works were reactionary in the sense that they emphasized feelings of depression, despair and pessimism in their portrayal of human beings faced with misfortune. Their works only served to paralyze our people's lofty consciousness aimed at protesting against the Japanese while supporting the efforts

to obey and cooperate with the Japanese colonialist authorities pursued by those involved in national reformism and national nihilism.

These works, which reflect historical fact but are in sharp contrast to the *Chuch'e* ideological direction, portrayal of art and characters, and description of life in both content and convention, show how sharp and complicated the confrontation between progressive and reactionary literature was in our country's modern literary world in the time leading up to and following the March First People's Uprising.

The confrontation and conflict between progressives and reactionaries in the literary world continued after this period, and the progressive development of national literature before Liberation was hindered and criticized by various reactionary, anti-factual literary elements within this sharp confrontation and struggle. The confrontation between literary progressives and reactionaries is not something that exists in the past; rather, it existed throughout the period the Revolution progressed and developed and continues to this very day.

Our entire people need to join together and fight in the struggle to protect the life of our nation's literature with the common understanding that the poisonous, decayed nature of bourgeois literature continues to be the foundation of the serious struggle between literary progressives and reactionaries, and that the reactionary ideological cultural invasion by the imperialists still continues vigorously to this very day.