The protagonist Kim Hŭi-jun, a progressive student, returns from Japan to his native village which has been rapidly changing under the influence of colonial modernization. He sees that a majority of the honest peasants have been impoverished while the less scrupulous ones, like the cunning pro-Japanese village administrator An Sŭng-hak, have prospered. Many villagers have lost their land and are forced to slave away in the hellish world of the local textile factory. The mentality of the villagers remains backward. They still follow the old traditions of forced early marriage and polygamy, worship the old Confucian norms of total obedience to one's parents’ will and so forth. Traditional religious beliefs of Shamanism and Buddhism and superstition occupy their minds side by side with the new Christian tenets.

Kim Hŭi-jun feels obliged to improve the life of the people around him. Following his disappointment with Christianity and a local youth organization, he resolves to restore the traditional rural system of ture or neighborhood mutual help groups, which not only help the peasants materially but also unite and enlighten them. In the long run the idea proves worthwhile. Under the leadership of Kim Hŭi-jun the unified peasants are able to attain a desirable goal – they are afforded the privilege of not paying rent after floods destroy their fields.

The social activity of the progressive student is intertwined with a love theme. Kim Hŭi-jun, once unhappily married to an ignorant older woman, falls in love with the young and well-educated Kap-suk (Yŏng-hŭi), who had foreseen her rich family, changed her name and become a factory worker. However, in order to maintain his loyalty to his family and “serve society”, Kim Hŭi-jun decides to suppress his true feelings and remains Kap-suk’s comrade-in-arms. The story ends on a very optimistic note – both of the protagonists greet the morning of a new day, which presumably symbolizes their anticipation of a new life.

In North Korea Native Land is invariably presented as a profoundly proletarian work, centered around the story of a workers’ union. South Korean scholar Na Pyŏng-ch’ŏl insists that Native Land is an example of “socialist realism” (which he understands as “literature written by a writer with a socialist worldview”). Some Soviet scholars went even further, insisting that the main hero is “a revolutionary” and the novel on the whole is devoted to the theme of the “revolutionary actions of the masses”. A.M. Tan calls the main protagonist Kim Hŭi-jun “a typical Korean Communist and revolutionary of the preparatory period of the anti-imperialist, anti-feudal revolution in Korea”. However, these interpretations are questionable. In my

545 V.N. Li, Sotsialisticheskii realizm v koreiskoi literature, 46, 47.
546 A.N. Taen, Ocherki sovremennoi koreiskoi literatury. Demokraticheskie natsional’nye tendentsii i sotsialisticheskie realii v koreiskoi literature, 322.
understanding what the above-cited authors are missing is the contradiction between the explicit leftist rhetoric, which occasionally occurs in the novel, and the actual traditionalist, anti-modernist essence of Native Land.

First of all, the “worker’s union” in the novel is mentioned only briefly (a single episode in the novel describes a strike at the textile factory). The practical effects of the factory strike followed by unrest in the village remain unclear since the strike led to no visible results. The peasants in fact were able to secure the cancellation of their rent payments but not through “fighting” or any “union” action. They simply blackmailed the village administrator by threatening to spread gossip about an amorous relationship between his daughter and a young man. This threat of blackmail is not exactly a “revolutionary” means of solving social conflicts.

According to the standard Marxist doctrine of the “vanguard role” and intrinsic “fighting spirit” of the proletariat, the author, indeed, delivered a number of eulogies to the working masses: "female workers are marked by a belief in their comrades, enthusiasm, hatred for injustice, self-confidence and an independent spirit”,547 "a worker is the child of a peasant. He is like a newly hatched chicken which looks at the world around him with clear, wide-open eyes. Looking at the workers, peasants understand that the dawn of their life will come someday",548 or "all we see around us is the result of the labor of the workers and peasants".549 Yet it is difficult to overlook the fact that all these panegyrics are barely connected with the narration. None of Yi’s important characters are workers — at the very best they, like Kap-suk, simply experience factory life temporarily. Apart from the above-mentioned “politically correct” commendation of the proletariat, the “workers” theme in the novel is largely conveyed in a similar manner to that of “Paper Factory Village” — through depressing images of workers’ misery and portraits of pale-faced and wretched factory girls, etc. Despite the rhetoric of the “vanguard role” of the workers, Yi Ki-yŏng depicts the proletariat in his favorite way — as a suffering mass to be saved and led by virtuous and sophisticated intellectuals. It is worth noting that in his allegedly “proletarian works”, modern industry and technology are mostly depicted as evil forces tearing apart the beautiful world of the traditional village. In general, Yi’s favorite peasant themes still constitute the core of the narration.

The “revolutionary” credentials of Native Land’s protagonists are also dubious. The activity of Kim Hŭi-jun, e.g. his revival of the traditional peasant ture mutual-help leagues with ritualistic songs and dances, can hardly be described as “revolutionary” or “proletarian”. In fact this constitutes a return to the past which the author describes once again as a paradise lost: "In the old days our peasants lived another, better life, a life full of poetry...Peasants could sit free of care under a tree and drink unrefined rice wine, makkŏlli, or play cards. Women would wash in the river and itinerant conjurers

547 Yi Ki-yŏng, Kohyang, 320-321.
548 Ibid., 223.
549 Ibid., 268.
entertained the people". The author obviously does not associate the "good old days" with those traditional customs which are particularly appalling to him, such as early and forced marriage, the enslavement of women, deep-rooted religious superstitions, etc. In fact, he somehow manages to associate these evils with the contemporary order of things, as if it was capitalization and colonization which brought these problems to a once virtuous Korean soil. "Nowadays there are stupidity, greediness, and ignorance everywhere". The restoration of ture in the novel is represented as a revival of a lost paradise for the peasants. "The villagers were as happy as if they were attending some feast... The restoration of ture unified the peasants. Even the mothers of Paekryong and Soetuk forgot their old enmity."

Another "revolutionary" heroine An Yŏng-hŭi (Kap-suk), indeed, indulges in "progressive" declarations ("first of all we must fight for our common freedom, not for our personal happiness"); "we must fight for freedom and win"; "we should not live for the physical only"; "happiness is not just the simple enjoyment of your own life. Happiness is offering your life for the sake of others"), but the nature of her actions remains vague. Kap-suk's "revolutionary fight" for the workers' rights at the factory ends in a rather predictable (and, for a change, plausible) manner -- her male boss yells at her and the girl, feeling that she "has no other choice" dutifully returns to her workplace.

Many "non-traditional" sections of the novel consider topics, which though socially important are unrelated to the Marxist perspective. They are in fact a repetition of the familiar themes of the "new tendency" literature which Yi Ki-yŏng had already promoted in his earlier short stories: the impoverishment of the village, the inhumane conditions in factories, the corruption of the clergy, early marriage, polygamy and so forth.

Some of the themes in the novel, being indeed innovative for Korean literature, bore the clear marks of a foreign origin. For instance, the love theme in the novel is developed in a manner quite unusual for Korean literature of the time. The decision of the main hero to forgo his feelings for the sake of the social good is taken with the following consideration, "It is better when a man and a woman, hand in hand like loyal and devoted friends, fight for their common ideals ... A comrade's love is nobler than an intimate relationship. It is so good to go forward together, side by side, as comrades". We can see here an apparent affinity with the early Soviet literature in which characters often choose to sacrifice their personal happiness and sexual gratification for the sake of "revolutionary struggle" (Mother is a good example of this tendency) and with the earlier Russian liberal literary tradition according to which a

550 Ibid., 114-117.
551 Ibid., 110-113.
552 Ibid., 193.
553 Ibid., 228, 407.
554 Ibid., 403.
555 Ibid., 469.
protagonist is often forced to choose between the “social” and the “personal” like Turgenev’s *On the Eve* (Insarov) or Chernyshevsky’s *What is To Be Done* (Rahmetov), etc.\(^{556}\) Also, the North Korean scholar Pak Chong-sik draws parallels between certain heroes of *Native Land* and *Quiet Flows the Don* (Kwŏn Kyŏn-ho – Grigorii Melihov, Kim Hŭi-jun – Mihail Koshevoi and so forth).\(^{557}\) The final chapter of the story, including the speech and the final cheeky phrase of Kim Hŭi-jun, “Let’s prepare for the next bright day,” vividly reminds us of the “revolutionary optimism” which was traceable in many Soviet “patriotic texts.” \(^{558}\)

Most of *Native Land*’s critics concurred that these borrowed traits did not work well in Yi’s novel and agreed on the implausibility of the love theme and “progressive” female characters in *Native Land*.\(^ {559}\) Indeed, Yi Ki-yŏng failed to show what prompted Kap-suk to attain her high level of political consciousness and transform her from the shy heiress of a wealthy family into a determined social activist. The writer himself later admitted that Kap-suk, though conceptually a “correct” character, nonetheless “contradicts the sense of reality”.\(^ {560}\) This implausibility of both the characters and the context is especially visible in the depiction of the rural girl, Pan-gae, who bore a striking affinity to Sholokhov’s Aksinia, the leading female character of *Quiet Flows the Don*. The critics of *Native Land* claim that Pan-gae’s provocative sexuality and boldness in the relationship with her loved one are definitely atypical for a 1930s Korean rural girl.\(^ {561}\)

Nevertheless, all these borrowed traits as well as the use of leftist jargon did not obliterolate Yi’s favorite “peasant” and “enlightenment” themes which continued to constitute the basis of the worldview expressed in the novel. These essential themes proved to be appealing to the vast majority of contemporary Koreans and ensured a wide popularity for the novel. Even Korean literary magazines of the “pure art” persuasion, such as *Chosŏn mundan* and *Samch’ŏnri*, greeted *Native Land* as “the pride of modern Korean literature”\(^ {562}\) and stressed such common social themes in the novel.

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\(^{556}\) E.M. Tsoi, *Otrazhenie velikih peremen v koreiskoi derevne v romanah Li Giena*, 73.

\(^{557}\) Pak Chong-sik. “Chosŏn munhak-e issŏsŏi ssobet’ŭ munhak-ŭi yŏnghyang”, 432.


\(^{559}\) As an example of South Korean scholarship see Kim Chae-yong, “Ileheha nonch’onūi hwangp’yehwawa nonminūi chuch’ejŏk kaksŏng”, 580. As an example of Soviet scholarship see V.I. Ivanova, *Li Gien: Zhizn’ i tvorchestvo*, 43. As an example of North Korean scholarship (published in Russian) see Pak Chong-sik, *Sovremennaya koreiskaia literatura posle osvobozhdenija. Formirovanie i stanovlennie sotrealizma v koreiskoi literature po tvorchestvu Li Giena*, 184.

\(^{560}\) Yi Ki-yŏng’s article on the topic named “Ideal Heroine” was published in 1939 in *Chonggwang* magazine, #4, 152. Quoted in V.I. Ivanova, *Li Gien: Zhizn’ i tvorchestvo*, 43.


\(^{562}\) *Samch’ŏnri*, 1936, #4, 319. Quoted in: V.I. Ivanova, *Li Gien: Zhizn’ i tvorchestvo*, 43
as “spring hunger in the village”, “peasants' suffering after a flood”, “the indecent activity of clergymen” and more.\textsuperscript{563}

It is noteworthy that Yi Ki-yŏng – unlike most KAPF writers – did not become an object of politically-motivated harangue in South Korea during the decades of military rule and obligatory Communist-bashing. The South Korean \textit{Dictionary of Korean Literature} in 1973, at the height of the anti-Communist hysteria just after the Yusin coup, described \textit{Native Land} as “a work of powerful life force”, as a “humanistic” novel whose main topic is allegedly “a search for compromise between landlords and tenants and the possibility of finding this through the reasonable consideration of peasants' needs”.\textsuperscript{564} This latter statement might have been a result of political pressures on the South Korean academic, but it still demonstrates that \textit{Native Land}'s vague political message leaves room for mutually contradicting interpretations. \textit{Native Land} could occupy a respectable place in the right-wing nationalist cannon of Korean literature while at the same time being treated as a specimen of “truly proletarian literature”. The North Korean scholar Sin Ku-hyŏn even insisted that \textit{Native Land} “was written under the direct influence of the anti-Japanese revolutionary struggle of Kim Il Sung”.\textsuperscript{565}

Though Yi Ki-yŏng himself perceived his novel as a serious ideological attack, the Japanese colonial power hardly perceived it as such. The novel was republished five times before Liberation, and in 1937 when the Japanese censorship turned especially harsh, \textit{Native Land} was translated into Japanese and published in the Japanese literary magazine \textit{Bungaku annai}.\textsuperscript{566}

\textbf{Decline of the leftist motifs (1934-1945)}

In the early 1930s the leftist trends in Yi Ki-yŏng’s writings began to decline. This was the inevitable result of the increasingly strict anti-Communist regulations imposed by the colonial administration from 1932 onwards. In 1934 the colonial police raided the KAPF office and arrested more than eighty of its members, including Yi Ki-yŏng. He was accused of subversive activity and spent about a year and a half in jail. In all probability his arrest and trial were due to his support of the general revolutionary line of the KAPF rather than his own personal problems with the colonial authorities. Notably, \textit{Native Land} was serialized daily in \textit{Chosŏn ilbo} during Yi’s imprisonment.\textsuperscript{567} On May 21, 1935 the dissolution of the KAPF was officially announced and the


\textsuperscript{564} Hanguk munhak taesajŏn, 452.

\textsuperscript{565} Sin Ku-hyŏn. Minch’on Yi Ki-yŏng, 127

\textsuperscript{566} Yi Sang-k’yŏng, Yi Ki-yŏng sidae-wa munhak, 452.

\textsuperscript{567} V.I. Ivanova, Li Gien: Zhizn’ i tvorchestvo, 46.
colonial administration began to press writers to join the pro-Japanese Korean Writers’ Society.\(^{568}\)

Brian Myers claims that in these circumstances “all KAPF veterans had renounced the revolutionary cause, either in their literary works or in formal declarations to their probation officers”. As for Yi Ki-yŏng, Brian Myers and most South Korean scholars claim that he “held the posts of executive secretary of Yi Kwang-su’s notorious Writers Society in 1939 and in the equally treasonous Patriotic Society of Korean Writers”\(^{569}\). Soviet scholars assert that the writer rejected the posts under the pretext of bad health.\(^{570}\)

Under these new circumstances Yi Ki-yŏng saw no choice but to adjust to the mounting pressure in his writings. His "conversion" was articulated in the form of so-called “industrial novels” (“Son of Earth” (“Taeji-ŭi adŭl”) (1939), “The Life Line” (“Saengmyŏngsŏn”) (1942), “Miners' Village” (“Kwangsan-ch’on”) (1943), or “Virgin Land” (“Ch’onyŏji”) (1944). In these novels the author “concentrated more on praising physical labor and the industrial development of the country.”\(^{571}\) Yet, these works leave room for very diverse interpretations. The South Korean scholar Yi Sang-gyŏng stresses that the pro-Japanese motifs in Yi Ki-yŏng’s “industrial novels” should be analyzed “with caution” for those novels could be equally seen as signs of the author’s “belief in the creativity of the Korean people”, and as works that “encouraged the inventiveness of Korean workmen”.\(^{572}\) In Soviet scholarship, for instance, the protagonist of the “pro-Japanese” “The Life Line” was treated as a progressive intellectual who could not stand a merciless Seoul full of arrogant Japanese and leaves to live in a village.\(^{573}\)

During the 1940s campaign to change Korean names to Japanese (ch’angssi kaemyŏng) Yi Ki-yŏng, according to most sources, refused to abandon his Korean name. He also refused to write in Japanese, offering the excuse that he did not know the language well enough. In 1944 the writer left Seoul for a rural district in Kangwondo province to support his family by working on the land as a tenant farmer.\(^{574}\)

\(^{568}\) Ibid., 47.

\(^{569}\) Brian Myers, *Han Sŏr-ya and North Korean literature*, 38.


\(^{571}\) Yi Sang-gyŏng, *Yi Ki-yŏng sidae-wa munhak*, 244.

\(^{572}\) Ibid., 296.

\(^{573}\) V.I. Ivanova, *Li Gien: Zhizn’ i tvorchesto*, 66.

After Liberation

Considering Yi Ki-yŏng’s pre-Liberation experiences, it comes as no surprise that after 1945 his life was connected with the Communist North. Immediately after Liberation Yi Ki-yŏng became involved in North Korean politics. He took part in the organization of the People’s Committee in the town of Naegŭngang and participated in various rallies which were quite common in those troubled times. From October 1945 the writer headed the Department of People’s Education in Kangwŏndo province.575

With his former KAPF colleague Han Sŏr-ya, Yi Ki-yŏng also contributed to the establishment of the new artistic organization called “Chosŏn P’ūrolletaria Yesul Tongmaeng” or the Korean Proletarian Art Federation, founded on 17 September 1945.576 Some critics believe that this organization was deliberately set up as counter to the “Chosŏn munhak kŏnsŏl pongbu” or the Center for the Construction of Korean Literature which had been established earlier in August by Han’s long-term enemies Yim Hwa and Kim Nam-ch’ŏn.577 South Korean scholar Yi Myŏn-jae sees no confirmation of such a conclusion.578 In any case both groups, along with many other early artistic associations in North Korea, proved to be short-lived. In 1946579 all of these disparate groups were unified as the “Pukchosŏn Munhak Yesul Tongmaeng” or North Korean Federation of Literature and Art (henceforth NKFLA), under the wing of the Party’s Department of Agitation and Propaganda. This was done to establish ideological control over intellectuals, an important requirement for any Stalinist regime.

Yi Ki-yŏng, as the oldest and most prominent “proletarian” writer, immediately found himself in this new organization. In March 1946 he was granted a personal meeting with Kim Il Sung in Pyongyang, during which the North Korean leader encouraged the writer to remain in the North and even helped him to find accommodation for his family who at the time still lived in Kangwŏndo.580 Soon afterwards Yi Ki-yŏng was appointed to the post of KAPF chairman. His chairmanship did not last long, however, and in 1948 Yi Ki-yŏng was replaced by Han Sŏr-ya who was widely seen as “the more keen political brain”.581 Nonetheless, Yi’s lofty position in the North Korean literary and official world had already been secured. After April

575 V.I. Ivanova, *Li Gien: Zhizn’ i tvorchestvo*, 68.
579 The scholars who agree that the NKFLA was established in 1946 claim contradictory dates of the month. Brian Myers writes that it occurred in September-October (see Brian Myers, 38). V.I. Ivanova insists that it was created in March (see V.I. Ivanova, *Li Gien: Zhizn’ i tvorchestvo*, 67). U Dae-sik names “the beginning of the year” (see U Tae-sik, “Haebang hu pukhan mundane koch’al”, 14).
581 Pak Nam-su, *Chŏk-ch’i 6 nyŏn-ŭi pukhan mundan*, 54.
1946 the writer was promoted to the important position of Chairman of the Central Committee of the Soviet-North Korean Friendship Association or Chssoch’insŏn hyŏphoe chungang uiw:onhoe uiw:onjang, a post which he retained for the rest of his life. In November 1946 he became a deputy of the People’s Assembly for Hoeryang town and was later made a member of the Provisional People’s Committee of North Korea. Politically, his membership in these “legislative bodies” of the regime did not mean much, but it was a sign of the special trust bestowed on the writer by the authorities. From August, 1948 Yi Ki-yŏng became a member of the Presidium of the Supreme People’s Assembly. In 1957 Yi Ki-yŏng became the Assembly’s Vice-chairman, a post which carried no political significance but was still very respected.

At the NKFLA’s official ceremony on 25 March 1946 the goals of the new organization and North Korean literature as a whole were formulated in the following manner:

1) The establishment of a national art and culture based on the principles of progressive democracy.

2) The promotion of the national unification of all Korean literary and artistic movements.

3) The extirpation of all anti-democratic and reactionary artistic forces and concepts be they Japanese imperialist, feudal, treasonous, or fascist.

4) The implementation of a large-scale enlightenment movement for the cultural, creative and artistic development of the masses.

5) The suitable appraisal and appropriation of the nation’s cultural heritage.

6) The exchange of our national culture with international culture.

Note that, unlike the KAPF program with its references to “Marxist ideology” and “proletarian struggle”, the NKFLA’s platform sounded more nationalist than militant Marxist. This can be explained by the official adherence to the so-called “theory of the people’s democratic revolution” which formed a dogmatic, prescriptive background to the Communist policies in the Soviet-controlled societies of post-war Eastern Europe and Korea. This theory stated that the nascent Communist regimes were to deal, first and foremost, with the “general democratic tasks”, including land reform, liquidation of hereditary privilege and the like. Only after these goals had been achieved was it possible to move further, towards full-scale Communist revolution. This strategy was not necessarily followed in real life, but it was certainly reflected in the official rhetoric and various kinds of program statements.

Yi Ki-yŏng seemed to be inspired by the new order. The nationalistic and enlightenment implications of the Party’s demands resonated well with the views and

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582 V.I. Ivanova, *Li Gien: Zhizn’ i tvorcestvo*, 68.


584 Cited in Brian Myers, *Han Sŏr-ya and North Korean Literature*, 42.

ideals of his pre-Liberation novels. Nor was the urge to imitate the “advanced cultures” too foreign to the writer who had been a zealous student and emulator of the Soviet literary patterns long before it was officially demanded. However, despite the sincere desire to follow the Party’s line, the fate of the first big novel Yi Ki-yōng wrote in North Korea on a contemporary topic, *Ttang (Land)* (1948-1949), was not trouble-free.

*Ttang (Land) (1948-1949) – the Troublesome Fate of a “patristic text”*

*Land* was written as a direct response to the Party’s request to reflect the ‘tremendous transformation’ in the villages in the course of the recent land reform. It was meant to be an embodiment of all the above-cited Party principles and a continuation of *Native Land*’s themes. From the very beginning, the novel had been regarded as the pride and a classic of North Korean literature. At the same time *Land* became the object of sustained critical attacks which, although they did not affect the reputation of the novel, resulted in a serious rewriting of the text.

The plot of *Land* can be summarized in the following manner:

Life in the remote village of Pōlmaël, which had been full of hardship and suffering under the Japanese colonial rule, was transformed into complete bliss following Liberation, land reform and the establishment of the new people’s government. The new authorities are represented by the chairman of the town committee, Kang Gyūn, a wise, intelligent and “all-round good guy” hero. Kang had come up with the idea of draining the marshes on the outskirts of Pōlmaël and turning the area into rice fields. An overwhelming majority of the village people enthusiastically supported the idea, shouting “Long Life to the Great Leader Kim Il Sung”, and the vision was gloriously realized.

The main protagonist, Kwak Pa-ui, who had been a poor and uneducated tenant in the past who once unfairly suffered in a Japanese jail, is especially zealous. After receiving his share of land, the hard working and socially active Kwak Pa-ui is transformed into a respectable member of the local community. His personal life also improves under the "sunshine" of the new order. In the past Kwak had been betrayed by his wife who had left him for another man while he was in jail. But now he had married the beautiful Chôn Sun-ôk who in the hellish past had been sold as a concubine to the rich landowner Yun Sang-yŏl to repay her father’s debts. The girl was now freed from her shameful past and had become an active member of the new society. The reactionary camp in the village community is represented by a few ex-landowners like Yun Sang-yŏl, Chu T’aero or Ko Pyong-sang. These “all-round bad guys” try to obstruct the new development of the village by organizing subversive acts, but are easily identified, seized and sent to prison. Several of their earlier supporters, such as the greedy middle-class merchant, referred to as Sun-Ŭi’s mother, eventually

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come to recognize their villainous nature, mend their own anti-social ways and join the positive majority of the villagers.

At the end of the novel Kwak Pa-ui is chosen as a member of the People’s Assembly and goes to Pyongyang for the Assembly meeting. In Pyongyang he meets the Great Leader Kim II Sung. At the Congress he also listens to the speeches of several deputies who had visited the Soviet Union – the Promised Land where “there are no jobless or hungry and where Man is the most precious thing”. The novel concludes with a panegyric to Kim II Sung and the new people’s government who have brought long—awaited happiness to the Korean land.

The novel can certainly be referred to as an example of the declared tendency of “absorption of the Soviet culture”. To begin with, Land bristles with frequent eulogies to the Soviet Army, Soviet culture, and the Soviet way of life. Most of the information about the latter leans heavily on Yi Ki-yŏng’s personal encounters with the Soviet Union during his several guided tours to that country in 1946-47, and for this reason it contains a lot of propagandistic falsities. As an example, one can mention the notion that in Soviet maternity homes there are allegedly personal telephones near each bed of the recently confined women and that every room is decorated in a different merry colour such as pink or blue. These claims are a far cry from the harsh reality of life in post-war Soviet Russia. Yi was obviously simply repeating what he was told by his Soviet minders.

“The absorption of the Soviet culture” is especially detectable in the artistic form of the novel. As has been mentioned before, many critics admit the strong influence of Sholokhov’s Virgin Land Under the Plough (Podniataia tselina) (1932) on Yi Ki-yŏng’s work. Both are farming novels glorifying the alleged “new village construction”, and many Virgin Land Under the Plough characters have their analogues in Land (Iakov Lukich and Ko Pyŏng-sang, Varia and Sun-ok, Grandpa Shchukar’ and Kang Sa-gwa, etc).

The similarities between David Molchun and Yi’s protagonist Kwak Pa-ui are especially remarkable. Like Sholokhov, Yi Ki-yŏng approvingly depicts his main hero as a silent, industrious man – undereducated but imbued with an extraordinary will and physical power. Yi Ki-yŏng admiringly compares his hero to an ox; the very protagonist’s name Pa-ui means “a rock” in Korean. These traits, indeed, have positive connotations in the Russian mentality and culture, but not so in a Korea with its Confucian disregard for physical labor and people engaged in it. (It is noteworthy

588 Yi Ki-yŏng, Tjang, 437-442.
590 M. Sholokhov, Podniataia tselina, 52; Yi Ki-yŏng, Tjang, 4.
that in the Korean tradition the strong ox served as a symbol of ignorance and stupidity).  

Yet another interesting detail in the image of Kwak Pa-ŭi is that, like Sholokhov’s peasant, the Korean hero is healthy and eats copiously and with gusto. Yi Ki-yŏng portrays this aspect of his character approvingly, which is remarkable in light of the fact that the majority of Yi Ki-yŏng’s positive pre-Liberation personages had refined manners.

There are also undeniable affinities in the general artistic technique and approaches of Land and Virgin Land. In both the authors visibly try to “enliven” the ideologically imposed storylines with comical episodes and the use of colourful dialectical and colloquial expressions: in Land Yi Ki-yŏng uses more than 70 (!) folk songs and legends, often repeating himself (the popular pattern of an old Korean fairytale Ōndal and the Princess which is a Korean variant of Beauty and the Beast, for instance, was used in both his pre-Liberation Native Land as well as in Land). However, there are profound conceptual disparities between Sholokhov’s and Yi Ki-yŏng’s novels.

First of all, the Soviet and North Korean novels differ in their emphasis on the political aspect. Virgin Land Under the Plough is often considered a patristic text of Soviet socialist realism, but it can hardly be defined as simple propaganda. While the novel’s perspective remains most definitely Communist, even Stalinist, no single character serves any narrow moralizing goal. The author makes it clear that his heroes are not ideal, that “everyone has his own “eccentricity””. For instance, Sholokhov’s upright Communists are often depicted as quite lazy, unskilled and clumsy peasants who cannot properly manage their own households. On the other hand, the enemies or “kulaks” are depicted as workaholics, good family heads and often physically attractive. The positive heroes fail to demonstrate the reputed “revolutionary humanism” of the proletariat. The semi-literate yet zealous Communist Nagulnov openly proclaims his readiness “to kill women, children, or old men for the sake of Revolution” (and this statement is reproduced with obvious disdain). The whole process of reform in Sholokhov’s village is shown as extremely difficult and painful, accompanied by cruelty, bloody fights and the suffering of the innocent. Not

591 A typical example of this tendency is the autobiographical novel of the contemporary South Korean writer Kim Chu-yŏng, Kogichabinŭn kadaerŭl kkŏkkchi annŭnda (A Fisherman Does Not Pluck a Reed) about the Korean village of the 1950s. Its central personage, Samsŏng, who, like Yi Ki-yŏng’s hero, is a physically strong, silent and ignorant man, is despised by the whole village. While depicting his hero Kim Chu-yŏng also often resorts to the image of an ox, but with opposite connotations. (See Kim Chu-yŏng, Kogichabinŭn kadaerŭl kkŏkkchi annŭnda [A Fisherman Does Not Pluck a Reed], Seoul: Midŭmsa, 1997).

592 Yi Ki-yŏng, Ttang, 96-100.

593 Mihail Sholokhov, Podniataia tselina, 367.

594 Ibid., 17, 41-42, 57, 447.

595 Ibid., 60.
accidentally the original title of the novel was *By Sweat And Blood (Potom I krovju).*\(^5\)

It is important that the slain enemies are here described as sympathetically as are the fallen positive heroes.\(^6\) Also, Sholokhov (like Yi, himself a peasant’s son) does not embellish the general environment of the village. His most sympathetic peasant protagonists are by no means saints in their private lives – they are simple-minded, uneducated people, who beat their wives, kill pets, spread ugly gossip, quarrel and fight with each other over petty problems, and at times indulge in drinking and womanizing.\(^7\)

In comparison, Yi Ki-yŏng’s *Land* appears to be an extraordinarily didactic novel. In general, Yi’s work is permeated with the stiff dualism of Good versus Evil, which is more typical of a parable than a supposedly realistic novel. In fact the two contrasting groups of heroes in *Land* call to mind an old Korean fairytale about two brothers Hŭnpu-wa Nolbu (Hŭnpu and Nolbu) and allusion to this tale appears at one point in the novel.\(^8\) In this tale the angelic Hŭnpu receives rewards from the good spirit while his devilish brother Nolbu is severely punished for his wrongdoings. Like Hŭnpu, the positive heroes of *Land* are flawless and imbued with all the virtues imaginable – they are modest, beautiful and industrious, socially active and selfless, etc. The few negative ones, such as Nolbu, are the embodiment of every imaginable evil: they are all ugly, lazy, greedy, selfish, lusting, deceitful and so forth.

Such cartoon-like villains do not pose a serious threat to the “all-round good guys”. Unlike Sholokhov’s convinced and well-motivated “enemies”, in *Land* the negative heroes, in addition to all their evils, are also weak and cowardly. With their laughable greed, comical mutual conflicts and complete inadequacy Yi Ki-yŏng’s ex-landowners serve more to enliven the narration than to create any sense of conflict.

Indeed, the conflict between the two camps appears so insignificant that some critics even failed to take it into account. While analyzing the role of Kwak Pa-ui, the North Korean critic Han Hyo pointed out that the character was an example of “the struggle to increase crop output and the struggle for the respect of the new power” etc. but did not mention any kind of struggle against a real enemy – obviously there was none.\(^9\) In general, the world of *Land* exemplifies Yi Ki-yŏng’s life-long inclination to deal with sweet, bucolic images.

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598 I. Konovalova, “Mihail Sholokhov kak zerkalo russkoi kollektivizatsii” [Mikhail Sholokhov as a Mirror of Russian Collectivization], *Ogonek* #25, 1999, 26-29.


600 Han Hyo, “Chosŏn munhak-e issŏsŏ sahoeju-ŭi realijum-ŭi palsaeng chokŏn-kwa kū paljŏn-e issŏsŏŭi che t’ukch’ing” [The Emergence of Socialist Realism in Korean Literature and the Specifics of its Development], *Munhak yesul*, 1952, #6, 92.
The conflict between the negative and the positive unfolds in a different sphere—in the black-and-white juxtapositions of the hellish colonial past and the joyful Communist present. One of the most typical is an episode of celebration in the family of peasant Pak who had received his parcel following the distribution of land by the new regime.\textsuperscript{601} Though no extra rice had yet appeared on the table of the always-hungry family, all the family members are consumed with exultation. While the old mother cries as she recollects the cheerless past, the youngsters dance and begin to invent a new song about the happy life of the peasants in North Korea. The scenes of the courtship and marriage of Kwak Pa-ui and Chôn Sun-ok are contrived in a similar way.\textsuperscript{602} Seeking the girl’s hand, Kwak declares to her that the country is now free and land reform has been completed, so now is the time to enjoy their lives. Party secretary Kang Gyun, who acts as a matchmaker for the couple, persuades the girl to believe in the possibility of happiness under the new social conditions. Sun-ok hesitates and cries recollecting the awful past, which has ruined her life but in the end she succumbs to the persuasion. The village women strongly encourage the couple to marry because “life is so beautiful today that it is precisely the time to have babies". At the marriage ceremony the guests, the bride and the groom are unanimous in their disgust at the previous life and their delight at how happy Koreans are now. The party is moved to dance and sing but discover that there are no merry songs about marriage in Korea since all the marriages in the past were unhappy. Thus, they try to compose a new wedding song. Alone at night the bride and groom cannot believe their bliss which, they stress, could happen only in the new Korea. In the morning after their first night they lie in bed, once again recollecting the hellish colonial past, only to launch into another cycle of praise for their new life, \textit{ad infinitum}.

This roundabout of “bitter recollections about the awful past and euphoric exaltation over their new and happy life”, “tears and laughter” runs non-stop through the quite lengthy novel. In addition to the “Japanese imperialists” of the past, the “American imperialists, who occupy South Korea’ in the present, also occasionally perform the role of enemy. On the whole, the “Bad Guys” are invariably distant outsiders, while the life of “authentic” Koreans under Kim Il Sung’s rule is associated exclusively with virtue, joy and happiness. Brian Myers called \textit{Land} “a product of ethnocentric pastoralism”.\textsuperscript{603} Actually, unlike Sholokhov’s \textit{Virgin Land} where the reality of the Soviet village in the early 1930s is portrayed with ambivalence and antagonism, in \textit{Land}, like in Han Sŏr-ya's “Growing Village”,\textsuperscript{604} the present is depicted as a cloudless harmony even though a mere three years had passed since Liberation. The new regime, like Jesus Christ, brings smiles to the faces of everyone and heals even the most seriously ill people. For instance, after the agrarian reform the paralyzed Old Ko begins to feel better and rises from his deathbed to have a look at the new rice

\textsuperscript{601} Yi Ki-yŏng, \textit{Ttang}, 46-52.
\textsuperscript{602} Yi Ki-yŏng, \textit{Ttang}, 231-243.
\textsuperscript{603} Brian Myers, \textit{Han Sŏr-ya and North Korean Literature}, 64.
\textsuperscript{604} Ibid., 60-67.
fields and a performance staged by the village youth.\textsuperscript{605} Virgin Land Under the Plough frequently depicts murder or illness, and it concludes with the death of the two main Communist heroes. In contrast, in Land none of the heroes suffer even minor physical discomfort.

In many respects the idealized present in Land reiterates the images of a mythologized Korean past, widely exploited in the earlier works of Yi Ki-yŏng.\textsuperscript{606} Again, Yi Ki-yŏng refers to the ture leagues as an ideal form of typically Korean mutual help.\textsuperscript{607} Land’s “evil” characters are depicted as the violators of the traditional moral norms of rural community – they, as typical villains in the Confucian mould, do not help each other and even cheat on their own brothers.\textsuperscript{608}

The interaction between the past and the present is especially interesting in the image of Kang Sa-gwa. A positive representative of “the old generation of poor but honest intellectuals”, he, despite his age, supports the new regime.\textsuperscript{609} Old Kang resolutely rejects the traditional principles of filial obedience, male polygamy, expensive mourning ceremonies and Confucian scholastics.\textsuperscript{610} His speech bristles with anti-Confucian rhetoric: “Chinese characters are useless relics”, “democracy is a kingdom of the workers” and so forth. These notions of the resolute elder are generally reminiscent of the pro-Communist stance of Sholokhov’s Grandpa Shchukar, only taken at face value; Land lacks the comical component of the latter – Sholokhov’s Grandpa Shchukar is a comic figure.

Kang’s proselytising negativism towards the Confucian past is not uniform, however. On the one hand, Kang Sa-gwa abhors the Confucian tradition – because of this rejection he had long since refused to become a scholar-official.\textsuperscript{611} Yet in another scene in the novel Kang refers to this same post of scholar-official as the ultimate prize for a talented youth.\textsuperscript{612} Describing the appearance of Kang Sa-gwa, the author notes with reverence: “The old man was so nobly beautiful that you could take him for an aristocrat”\textsuperscript{613} – a notion which would be impossible in Soviet literature with its "popular spirit". The Confucian maxims in the novel are also presented ambivalently – when ex-landowner Ko Pyŏn-sang uses them to justify his points (“wealth and poverty are an expression of the natural order of things”) the author is mocking his traditional

\textsuperscript{605} Yi Ki-yŏng, Ttang, 384-389.
\textsuperscript{606} Brian Myers spotted the same trait in the work of Han Sŏr-ya “Growing Village” (See: Brian Myers, Han Sŏr-ya and North Korean Literature, 60-67).
\textsuperscript{607} Yi Ki-yŏng, Ttang, 298-320.
\textsuperscript{608} Ibid., 132-142.
\textsuperscript{609} Ibid., 121-124.
\textsuperscript{610} Ibid., 124-125.
\textsuperscript{611} Ibid., 124.
\textsuperscript{612} Ibid., 130-132.
\textsuperscript{613} Ibid., 124.
reasoning, but when Kang Sa-gwa resorts to the same idiom “The current political events are the expression of the natural order of things,” the statement is treated as a sign of his high intelligence and deep wisdom.

In respect to female theme, Yi Ki-yông’s outrage against Confucian morality was inconsistent as well. For instance, Yi approvingly wrote about the behavior of Kang’s obedient daughter-in-law who, “sitting at a distance, listened in reverent silence to the conversation of the elders”. The younger woman knew her place – and this was very praiseworthy. Through the lips of Kang Sang-kwa the writer expressed his approval of Sun-ok’s attempt at suicide, which was a traditional means for a Korean woman to protect her dignity and chastity. Still, in general the theme of the “new Korean woman” is probably the most radical in the novel.

As we have mentioned before, the idea of gender equality represented, in a sense, the quintessence of enlightenment for Yi Ki-yông, and he apparently tried to present the “progressive” vision of a new Korean woman who was free from the restraints of the old society and was now joyfully following the new path. With respect to ideological transformation and adherence to “Communist novelty,” one may say that the image of Sun-ok certainly outshines Sholokhov’s more realistic images of rural women.

In Sholokhov’s novel the rural Cossack women are shown infinitely more backward and conservative than the males. They may be independent-spirited, bright or smart, but by no stretch of the imagination are they vanguard revolutionary fighters. Very often it was the women in Virgin Land Under the Plough who start to rebel against the new regime and physically attack the Communists. The main female protagonist of the novel, the sensual beauty Lushka, easily manipulates the Communist males and for a while even manages to lead some of them astray. Yet the author depicts this village femme fatale with a warm humor and veiled admiration. The most “progressive” female character Varya who engaged the Communist protagonist Davudov, is modest, loving and kind. Yet her decision to study in an agrarian college in order to help her collective farm is not a result of her conscious political choice but the very traditional desire to please her fiancée (“I will follow him anywhere”; “I’ll do everything he says”).

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614 Ibid., 43-46.
615 Ibid., 122-123.
616 Indeed Yi Ki-yông’s views on gender issues were quite inconsistent. Sông Hye-rang, a sister of one of Yi Ki-yông’s daughters-in-law, recollects that ‘the feminist’ Yi Ki-yông was an extremely conservative father-in-law who treated his female family members in a very traditional Confucian way (See Sông Hye-rang, Tùngnamu chip, 366-367). This information is confirmed by the interview with Chông Ryul who also stresses that Yi Ki-yông’s house and way of life was, indeed, “very traditional”.
617 M. Sholokhov, Podniataia tselina, 261-268.
618 Ibid., 442-444, 453.
619 Ibid., 567
In contrast, Land’s positive female protagonists, and especially Sun-ok, though having been oppressed much more severely in their previous lives than their Cossack counterparts, are shown as miraculously transformed into staunch Communist “new women” under the influence of “the people’s rule” within a mere few years. The quiet and modest rural Korean woman Chôn Sun-ok, who once allowed her father to sell her as a concubine and, like a model Confucian heroine, attempted suicide after hearing malicious gossip about herself, in a twinkling becomes the politically active chairwoman of the village Women’s Union. She is also the first in the village to join the Workers’ Party and “help to mobilize people to accomplish the sowing campaign ahead of schedule teach illiterate girls etc”. In the evening she reads newspapers to her illiterate husband “choosing the most important political news and explaining the Party line to him”. At night the newlyweds have long talks about the happiness of the Korean people and the terrible Japanese colonial past (or, for a change, the nightmarish South Korean life under American rule), or discuss political events.

Take for example, one of their typical discussions about “voluntary rice taxes” (which were not so voluntary at all). The husband asks Sun-ok: “Are you sure that you give this rice with all your heart? If there is even a bit of sorrow in your soul it would not be a real expression of your gratitude towards the State.” Needless to say Sun-ok is a genuine volunteer. In addition to the “voluntary tax” the spouses decided to donate an extra 10 bags as “patriotic rice”. On the rare occasions when this politically conscious heroine happens to occupy herself with ordinary household chores, she feels inappropriately earthy and guilty. For example, one evening after Sun-ok has listened to the politically inspired reasoning of her husband, she suddenly feels “deeply ashamed because a philistine love of comfort and decency has become rooted in her soul. While her husband is so lofty, she thinks too much about hygiene, forces him to wash himself regularly and dress neatly... What petty bourgeois thoughts!” Sun-ok falls on her knees and begs her husband’s forgiveness for her imperfections. As was the case with his pre-Liberation revolutionary female protagonists, Yi Ki-yông failed to show the process of the development of his heroine: her change is just taken for granted.

Nevertheless, Sun-ok’s image, however stilted and sickly “correct”, met with a range of negative critical responses in North Korean literary circles – superficially, for its ideological insufficiencies. In the opinion of Pak Chôn-sik, Sun-ok’s life “lacks social activity”. Ôm Ho-sôk, while singling out Land as a positive “example of patriotism” in general, condemns the relationship between Kwak Pa-ui and Chôn Sun-ok as “too sensual”: “Just as a reader of the Story about Ch’unhyang (Ch’unhanggôn) could only see the love relationship between Ch’unhyang and Yi Mong-nyong instead

620 Yi Ki-yông, Tiant, 264.
621 Ibid., 405-410.
622 Ibid., 348.
623 Pak Chong-sik, Sovremennaia koreiskaia literatura posle osvobozhdenija, 220.
624 Classical Korean novel.
of the objective historical picture, so in *Land* the reader can only see the love between Kwak Pa--ui and Sun-ok". 625 Considering the total absence of love scenes in the novel this accusation appears completely unfounded. E.M. Tsoi, a Soviet-Korean critic, articulated another improbable claim: “Some critics and readers seriously disapproved of the image of Chôn Sun-ok. Its flaws appear especially visible in comparison to the irreproachable Kwak Pa--ui. Such a negative attitude is quite natural if we consider Sun-ok’s past when she was a member of a landowning family and lived as a concubine – i.e. not by her own labor”. 626 Justifying such accusations Tsoi, however, attempts to excuse the “sinner”; “We must take into account the fact that Yi Ki-yông’s heroine has only just started to be reclaimed”. 627

The reason for all this unfounded quibbling was simple – the highest arbitrator in North Korea, Kim Il Sung had already cast his judgment on Sun-ok’s image and thus had decided the fate of this important character in later, re-worked, versions of *Land*. During one of his meetings with Korean writers, the Great Leader expressed his dissatisfaction at the fact that the companion of the exemplary hero of the novel was a “former mistress”: “Everybody needs pure water. I should like to give this tenant farmer, who has slaved and hungered so long in darkness and tyranny, pure water (italics added – T.G.)”. 628 Of course this remark has nothing to do with Sun-ok’s alleged membership of the class of exploiters, or her “social passivity”. Brian Myers wittily remarks that Kim Il Sung certainly did not believe that “the tenant-hero’s own failed marriage should prevent him from marrying another virgin. All may want “pure water”, but in Kim’s DPRK, it would seem, only men have a right to it” 629

Needless to say, the obedient critics quickly picked up the attitude of the Great Leader and busied themselves finding new and newer deficiencies in Sun-ok’s image. Nobody cared that the patriarchal approach to gender relationships, which was articulated by the highest Pyongyang authority, contradicted both the written requirement of the NKFLA “to extirpate feudal concepts” and the usual visions of Soviet literature which was supposed to be an unquestioned model for North Korean writers. Indeed, though a purist Soviet dictator would by no means tolerate the propagation of lechery and promiscuity in art, in the canons of Soviet literature, the loss of a heroine’s virginity because of a previous marriage or rape has never been regarded as an indelible stain on her reputation. 630

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625 Ōm Ho-sŏk, *Munye kibon* [The Basis of Literature and the Arts]. P’yŏngyang: Kunnip ch’ulp’ansa, 1952, 64.
627 Ibid., 146.
628 Cited in Brian Myers, *Han Sŏr-ya and North Korean Literature*, 84.
629 Ibid., 84
630 One of the earliest examples of this tendency in Soviet literature is a characteristic episode in the exemplary work of socialist realism, Ostrovskii’s *How the Steel was Tempered* (1932-1934). When a male hero in the novel expresses his discontent with a “female comrade” who had supposedly lost her virginity during a rape, he was immediately chastised by his other comrades as a backward, possessive, even reactionary person. (See N. Ostrovskii, *Kak
Yi Ki-yŏng himself saw nothing wrong in the status of his heroine as an ex-concubine: firstly, the institution of concubinage was regarded as a special form of marriage in old Korea, and secondly, in Sun-ok’s case this marriage was involuntary. Yi Ki-yŏng explained his understanding of the situation through Kang Sa-gwa’s lips: “There is nothing wrong with the second marriage—the tradition of concubinage is to blame.” Yet he had to readjust his work according to the demands of the Great Leader and rewrite it several times, with an especially thorough reworking taking place in 1973. In the later version Sun-ok was transformed into a virgin and Kwak’s wife did not betray him but died of hunger. In the 1960 and later versions, the eulogies to the “Soviet liberators” and the Soviet way of life were edited out: the relations between Moscow and Pyongyang had soured.

In 1974 in his article “Having Only Loyalty in Mind” (“Ojik ch’ungsŏng-ŭi han maŭm-ŭro”) Yi Ki-yŏng humbly admitted his “mistake”: “How could I marry such a perfect hero to a woman who had been the concubine of a landowner? That was of course a mistake which I committed because I did not understand the new reality of a liberated village. Kwak Pa-ŭi was a new hero who could marry only a virgin... I am grateful to the Great Leader who expressly mentioned this fault of mine.”

Yi Ki-yŏng’s “mistake” clearly demonstrated that the officially proclaimed doctrine of “socialist realism” in the DPRK, like in the Soviet Union, was little more than a set of shallow and mutually contradictory declarations which could be easily reinterpreted or neglected according to the current Party needs or the caprice of a top official. What Yi Ki-yŏng, in fact, missed were the real implications of new literary policy which, despite all the rhetoric about “progressive democracy”, “extermination of feudal concepts” or “absorption of advance cultures”, demanded first of all the promotion of unconditional ethnocentrism. In the light of this unofficial demand which openly emerged in 1955 in Kim Il Sung’s above-mentioned speech on chuch’e, Yi Ki-yŏng’s novel, indeed, was not “correct”: a “truly Korean heroine should be a virgin at her marriage, a “truly Korean” wife should never appear as a traitor, but rather die as a martyr at the hands of the bestial Japanese, and any praise for a foreign innovation represented an offence to the “national cultural heritage”.

zakalyalas’ stal’ [How the steel was Tempered], Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe isdatel’stvo detskoj literatury, 1948, 140). The Soviet tradition steadily maintained this stance even in times when the notions of sexual freedom popular in the early Soviet period were gradually substituted with a more patriarchal approach to gender issues. It is notable that even the most conservative Stalinist literature demonstrated a proclivity to defend and commiserate, rather than to accuse a heroine who participates in extra-marital relationships. One may recall a typical episode in the above-mentioned Trifonov’s Studenty [Students] (1950).The female personage Valia loses her virginity in a relationship with the protagonist Sergei. Though both are adults and the relationship is completely voluntary, she is presented as a victim of a lecher, not as a responsible participant in the affair. (See Yuri Trifonov, Studenty, 23-406).

631 Yi Ki-yŏng, Tjang, 122-124.
632 Quoted in Yi Sang-gyŏng, Yi Ki-yŏng sidae-wa munhak, 352.
The rewritten *Land* represents a curious “ideal picture”. This picture was a far cry not only from the Soviet patterns of fiction with their emphasis on class struggle and “iron will” characters *a la* Korchagin, Pavel Nilin or Davidov, but also from the realistic images of suffering peasants, unremitting toil and a desperate struggle for survival which had filled the earlier writings of Yi Ki-yǒng. *Land* corresponds much more with the conventions of fairytales: it presents the reader with mild conflicts where the “good guys” always win, where there is an absence of harsh scenes and where unrealistically perfect harmony reigns supreme. A peaceful bunch of positive heroes in the mould of the fable Hùngbu are tied to each other by traditional Confucian values. They playfully subdue several unsavory Nolbus who are totally non-Confucian and pro-Japanese and who make stupid and completely inept attempts to harm this lovely “truly Korean” community. Occasionally some members of the positive group may also act out of character. They may demonstrate childish selfishness or stubbornness, like, for instance, Sun-ǔi’s mother. Yet under the positive influence of the community they are quickly put straight and feel ashamed of themselves like badly behaved children after being placed in a time-out area. The rest of their lives the positive heroes devote to the enthusiastic service of the Communist state, collecting “patriotic rice” and reading official newspapers, thus acting completely “nicely”. To stress the exemplary nicety of this assemblage, the author from time to time recalls a hellish past under ill-spirited foreign rulers or muses over the other ill-willed foreign power which is allegedly torturing the distant South – all of these are more like fairy story monsters than real-life enemies.

This troop of happy and loyal children is wisely ruled by omnipresent and omnipotent father figures. In the first instance this figure is the chairman of the town committee, Kang Gyǔn, and high above stands the perfect and infallible Great Leader. In general, the rewritten *Land* represented a realized ethnocentric peasant paradise once proposed by Seoulite in *Minch’ŏn*, and supplemented by some new propagandistic notions. This was what the new regime actually required from the writer.

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*Land* proved to be the only major novel which Yi Ki-yǒng wrote on contemporary themes. Soon afterwards the writer began his lengthy epic *Tumangang*, the first sections of which were published in 1954-1957. This novel was devoted to the past, and the writer could once again safely resort to his familiar tearful – and realistic – images of suppressed women, injustice and the hard life of the Korean peasantry. In all probability this return to history was Yi Ki-yǒng’s means of seeking refuge in the past, much like Gorky in the later years of his life.

Yi’s few later works on contemporary themes were short, terse and in an artistic sense represented a remarkable decline in quality which the South Korean scholar Yi Sang-gyǒng was quick to point out. If in *Tumangang* Yi still occasionally indulged

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634 Yi Sang-gyǒng, *Yi Ki-yǒng sidæ-wa munhak*, 42.
in his favorite rural maxims and folk images, his writings about the present such as Pulgūn such’ôp (Red Block Note) (1961) which described an enthusiastic bunch of North Korean youths who initiated the “Ch’ônlima” movement at a railroad construction site, completely lost these folklorist colors and are astonishingly blunt in both imagery and language. This tendency was especially characteristic of his novel The Fate of a Woman (Han yŏsŏng-ûi unmyŏng), written in the early 1960s and which presented a black-and-white didactic contrast between the pre- and post-Liberation lives of the female protagonist P’illye. The writing style of the novel and the language the heroine uses reminds one of the dry articles from Nodong Sinmun rather than a literary piece. Indeed, in the early 1960s Yi Ki-yŏng’s artistic arsenal became visibly impoverished where both the plots and the characters were narrowed to complete utilitarianism.

In all probability, these changes were not accidental. After the long process of accommodation of Land to the ever-changing demands of the new regime, which, in fact, insisted on a further and further simplification of the novel, Yi Ki-yŏng may have found it unnecessary to use elaborate artistic technique. And besides, his jealous boss Han Sŏr-ya, being unpopular among the public, would not tolerate any competition and Yi Ki-yŏng preferred not to irritate him. Yi Ki-yŏng died at the age of 90, on the 9th of August, 1984, at the height of his official recognition and privilege. As for the actual popularity of his novels among the North Korean reading public, that was a matter of no concern in the DPRK.

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Such was the life of a person who was proclaimed a living classic of Korean “proletarian” literature, whose work was included in the official canon and whose name is still widely celebrated in the DPRK. As we have seen, Yi Ki-yŏng demonstrated neither a clear-cut Communist/proletarian worldview nor a particularly brilliant literary talent. The ideology of his pre-Liberation works, often presented as the earliest examples of the “socialist realism” in Korean literature, was hardly Marxist. His views could be better described as “peasant utopianism” with strong anti-modernist tendencies, occasionally spiced with leftist rhetoric.

Still, Yi turned out to be the very figure that the Pyongyang cultural establishment required in the late 1940s – for several reasons. First, Yi’s traditional peasant perspectives were quite useful in claiming “authentic” roots for the nascent North Korean culture and thus proving its legitimacy. These perspectives also resonated well with the values of the North Korean regime which, from the very

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635 Yi Ki-yŏng, Pulgūn such’ôp [Red Block Note], Pyongyang: Minh’ŏng ch’ulp’ansa, 1961.
636 Yi Ki-yŏng, Han nyŏsŏng-ûi unmyŏng.
637 The conflict between Han Sŏr-ya and Yim Hwa, who was a much more popular literary figure than Han, led to the disappearance of Yim from literary scene. The episode, as well as the role of Han Sŏr-ya in the North Korean literary world, is discussed in the final chapter of the present thesis.
beginning, placed great emphasis on the promotion of nationalistic ideas. The ordinariness of Yi’s literary abilities was of assistance when it came to the actual participation of the writer in the propagandistic activity of the post-Liberation era. And, of course, the readiness of the writer to follow the current orders of the regime and not to question its authority in literary matters was very helpful under the circumstances. Thus, Yi Ki-yŏng’s figure fitted perfectly into Pyongyang’s official design.

Yet, anyone familiar with the turbulent situation in North Korean literary circles in 1945-1960 might pose a question: if Yi Ki-yŏng made “political mistakes” serious enough to provoke displeasure of Kim Il Sung himself and necessitate the rewriting of some 60% of his major novel, how could he not only survive, but even score a remarkable success within the official literary bureaucracy? While we have no full access to the documents of the period, we may only speculate on the reasons, and should not rule out the fact that luck played some role. However, interviews with the people who knew Yi personally as well as an investigation of his life-long attitudinal patterns have given me reason to conclude that to a significant degree Yi’s long and safe North Korean career was made possible by his ability to maintain good but relatively distant relationships with people in power, no matter who they were. This, in its turn, was the result of Yi’s personal attributes such as his ability to get along with people easily, his lack of personal political and administrative ambition, and his remarkable talent for avoiding conflict, morally compromising situations and potentially dangerous contacts.

All my informants recall Yi Ki-yŏng with genuine sympathy, as a gentle person who was never spoiled by success or corrupted by power. V.I. Ivanova, the Soviet author of a monograph on Yi Ki-yŏng, who worked with the writer in P’yŏngyang in 1949 and then met with him several times in Moscow, recalls that in those days the Russian personnel liked to work with Yi Ki-yŏng. He was a modest client and kind to his staff, and this presented a great contrast with his arrogant and capricious boss Han Sŏr-ya, also a frequent Moscow visitor at the time. 638 Pak Myŏn-sun (Elena Pak), a Korean-Russian translator of Russian and Korean literature in Pyongyang, remembered Yi as a very placid man who always kept away from politics and personal clashes. 639 Yi’s KAPF and then North Korean colleague, the prose-writer Song Yong recalls that Yi Ki-yŏng’s ability to remain silent in the most heated discussions earned him the nickname of the “speechless/silent writer” (“muŏn-ŭi in”, or “mal ōmnŭn chakka”) from his KAPF colleagues. 640 Chŏng Ryul, once a close personal friend of Yi Ki-yŏng, reports that when Yi’s colleagues in private conversation happened to berate their absent peers and asked for Yi’s opinion about a particular person, Yi always answered unwillingly: “I do not know the man well enough, how can I judge him?” Chŏng Ryul could not remember Yi ever criticizing anybody in private and claims that he “had never had enemies”. 641 Indeed, even political adversaries were remarkably soft on Yi

638 Interview by telephone with V.I. Ivanova.
639 Interview by telephone with Elena Davydova (Pak Myŏn-sun).
640 Song Yong, “Chakka minch’ŏn”, Munhak sinmun, #5, 1960, 27.
641 Interview with Chŏng Ryul.
Ki-yŏng. Pak Nam-su in his negative recollections omitted Yi’s name while chastising almost all of his colleagues. He mentioned Yi Ki-yŏng a mere handful of times and in a surprisingly neutral tone.

These qualities earned Yi Ki-yŏng a special reputation among North Korean writers. Most of them treated him as a quiet, courteous old man, slightly eccentric and essentially harmless. Chŏng Ryul recollects a remarkable anecdote about Yi. One day Yi Ki-yŏng reported his eagerness to enter the Labor Party. The Party group leader asked the writer about his motives, expecting to hear some lofty phrases, but Yi Ki-yŏng answered naively: "It is so fashionable now. Everybody is in the Party, and I want to too". The Party officials laughed and said: “No, harabŏji (grandfather in Korean - TG). You’d better remain out-of-fashion". It is significant that Yi’s careless notion, which would certainly entail serious consequences for anybody else in a Stalinist world, was simply chuckled at. We can therefore surmise that his other political “mistakes” were probably treated much with the same leniency.

Yi’s relationships with the mighty Han Sŏr-ya, an associate of Yi Ki-yŏng from before Liberation and then his boss in North Korea after 1945, were especially significant in this regard. Brian Myers, relying on an open letter written by Han Sŏr-ya to Yi Ki-yŏng in 1936, asserts that Han “seems to have admired him (Yi Ki-yŏng) greatly”. I suspect, however, that Myers took at face value a simple compliment which Han who was at the time an unremarkable second-rate novelist, employed to please his already famous senior colleague. After Liberation when Han rose to the dizzy heights of administrative power, his references to Yi became much less favorable. Chŏng Ryul recollects that in private Han Sŏr-ya used to speak about him with irony, treating Yi Ki-yŏng as a good-for-nothing old scribbler who did not even deserve the name of writer when compared to himself – while Han continued to be known as an imitator of Yi’s works from the very beginning of the KAPF activity. It is no secret, for instance, that Han’s pre-Liberation novel “Dusk” (“Hwanghon”) (1936), highly praised during Han’s “golden age” (1956-1961) as an “immortal masterpiece of progressive literature”, was written under the strong influence of Yi’s Native Land (Kohyang) (1933-34). After Han established control over the North Korean literary bureaucracy, the official versions of previous events were changed. From the early 1950s onwards Han was presented as the leader of the entire “proletarian literature” movement, whereas Yi Ki-yŏng was relegated to Han’s shadow.

Yi Ki-yŏng appears not to have been overly concerned about the misrepresentation of his pre-1945 role. He simply accepted the new order of things and began to pay the required tribute to Han’s alleged “historic significance”. Such tactics successfully neutralized Han’s ever-jealous attitude to his professionally more

642 Interview with Chŏng Ryul.
643 Brian Myers, Han Sŏr-ya and North Korean Literature, 32.
644 Interview with Chŏng Ryul.
645 Yi Myŏng-jae, Pukhan munhak sajŏn, 368.
646 See, for instance, Yi Ki-yŏng, “K’ap’ŭ sidae-ŭi hoesanggi”, 81-86.
prominent colleague. While Han Sŏr-ya relentlessly destroyed all possible rivals, he let Yi hold the position of “number two” in the literary scene. In 1958 both “Dusk” and Native Land were touted as twin pillars of Korean socialist realism.\footnote{Brian Myers, Han Sŏr-ya and North Korean Literature, 119.}

Being respectful towards his boss, Yi Ki-yŏng, however, managed to keep a reasonable distance from him in his daily and social life. In spite of their shared KAPF background, Yi had never been a part of the inner circle of Han Sŏr-ya, nor had he sought his special patronage.\footnote{Interview with Chŏng Ryul.} These tactics turned out to be especially rewarding later when Yi survived the purge of many ex-KAPF members which followed Han’s fall in 1962.\footnote{Brian Myers, Han Sŏr-ya and North Korean Literature, 191.} He was similarly pleasant and distant to the Soviet Koreans, and at the moments of sharpest conflicts between ex-KAPF associates and the Soviet faction Yi managed to maintain good relationships with both groups.\footnote{Interview with Chŏng Ryul.} This was why Yi, in spite of his KAPF legacy in 1946, was appointed to head the central committee of the Soviet-Korean friendship association, a position which he held until 1982.\footnote{Interview with Chŏng Ryul.} And probably even more astonishing was Yi Ki-yŏng’s friendship with Yi T’ae-jun which developed soon after Liberation. Despite the fact, that before Liberation both writers belonged to ideologically and personally conflicting groups (a fact which most ex-KAPF writers were not inclined to forget), after Yi T’ae-jun came to the North Yi Ki-yŏng started to communicate with him regularly, having long talks about literature and the arts, etc.\footnote{Yi Myŏng-jae, Pukhan munhak sajŏn, 369.}

Yi Ki-yŏng’s ability to maintain a broad public air of geniality with a reasonable degree of reserve, a reserve which automatically disabled too close association of his figure with any particular political group or person, proved to be very helpful in times of political turmoil when power fluctuated constantly between different factions. Of course it is difficult for us to distinguish between cunning scheming or manipulation and a natural conviviality in Yi Ki-yŏng’s attitude. Some circumstances, however, give us reason to assume that Yi Ki-yŏng was not a fully rational opportunist whose only goal was to survive and prosper by any means. Yi’s KAPF colleague, Song Yŏng, paraphrasing a Korean proverb once called Yi Ki-yŏng a “person of outer tenderness and inner steel” (“naegang oeyu” in Korean).\footnote{Interview with Chŏng Ryul.} Indeed, along his challenging life journey Yi Ki-yŏng, a seemingly feeble and irresolute person, often demonstrated this “inner steel”. During the purges of 1953-1956 Yi had the courage not to join the slander campaigns against his doomed colleagues. He dared not challenge the accusations against the “unmasked enemies of the people” openly, but discovered his own way of evading “duties” which he patently disliked. Yi often managed to slip away from political meetings held to “unmask” and “condemn” a recently discovered

\footnote{Yi Myŏng-jae, Pukhan munhak sajŏn, 369.}

\footnote{Interview with Chŏng Ryul.}

\footnote{Song Yŏng, “Chakka minch’ŏn”, 27.}
“reactionary” or “spy” under the common excuse of a “sick stomach”, an alleged chronic disease which by some coincidence always worsened just before the start of a new defamation campaign. On the rare occasions when Yi Ki-yŏng was forced to take part in such public events, he remained silent.\textsuperscript{654} Scholars also refer to this tactic when they describe Yi’s pre-Liberation activity. In order to avoid participation in the activity of pro-colonial bodies such as the notorious Korean Writers’ Society in 1939, Yi Ki-yŏng also frequently claimed an alleged stomach illness.\textsuperscript{655}

Characteristically, Yi Ki-yŏng always avoided noisy political activism. The obligatory eulogies to the Great Leader in Yi’s books and articles did not exceed the level which was commonly required at the time. This does not mean that Yi harbored any political dissent or animosity towards Kim Il Sung, but rather testifies to the fact that Yi did not strive for political success.\textsuperscript{656}

Chŏng Ryul recollects with gratitude that at the harshest moments of the witch-hunting campaigns against the Soviet Koreans, Yi Ki-yŏng was one of the very few NKFLA colleagues who did not change his friendly attitude towards the scapegoats. He continued to meet with the Soviet Koreans, visit them in their homes, etc. This immutable friendliness became a precious moral support to his doomed colleagues. And it was another sure expression not only of Yi Ki-yŏng’s “outer tenderness” but his “inner steel” as well.

\textsuperscript{654} Interview with Chŏng Ryul.

\textsuperscript{655} V.I. Ivanova, \textit{Li Gien: Zhizn’ i tvorchestvo}, 48; A. Gitovitch, B. Bursov, \textit{My videli Koreju}, 86.

\textsuperscript{656} Details of the interview with Pak Sang-ho, Leningrad, November 1989 have been kindly provided by Andrei Lankov.
Chapter 4

YI T’AE-JUN: THE FAILURE OF A “SOLDIER ON THE CULTURAL FRONT”

Over recent decades Yi T’ae-jun’s tragic fate has remained a popular subject of study in the South Korean academic world and attracted the attention of the most distinguished scholars. However, the majority of them tend to approach the issue from essentially the same angle. They discuss how it was that Yi T’ae-jun, a member of the apolitical Nine Members Club and an implacable enemy of the KAPF before Liberation, eventually chose the Communist North? Why did the “pure writer”, “the most unadulterated sŏnbi (“learned gentleman”)” of Korean literature, “the extoller of pure art” etc who had been so passionately attached to the traditional Confucian culture and so averse to any violence, suddenly change his ways and begin to eulogize bloody scenes of “class struggle” and Communist virtues?

The most popular explanation is that Yi T’ae-jun’s move to North Korea was the naïve and tragic mistake of a fragile intellectual whose alienation from real life blinded him to the true nature of Stalinism. According to the proponents of this view, Yi T’ae-jun strove to find an ideal world in the Stalinist DPRK and by the time he discovered that he could not fit into the Communist mould, it was too late. The fragile and otherworldly intellectual fell victim to his short-lived illusions. As Yi Pyŏng-ryŏl puts it, “Yi T’ae-jun could not turn into a full Kim Il Sungist and for that reason could not survive in the North”, thus implying ideological divergences between the great writer and the omnipotent North Korean leader.

These theories are advanced by a majority of South Korean scholars even though the accents and shades of interpretation may vary. Some theorists, who are no doubt influenced by psychoanalysis, search for the roots of Yi’s post-1945 “ideological shift” in his unhappy childhood, his experience as an orphan and his desire “to reunite himself with his dead father”, a leftist sympathizer who had died when the future writer was only five years old. Others, while acknowledging the impact of his orphaned

657 Yi Ki-pong, Puk-ŭ munhak-kwa yesurin, 203.


661 Wada Tomomi, “Aeguk munhagurosŏŭ Yi T’ae-jun munhak” [The Literature of Yi T’ae-jun as Patriotic Literature], in Kŏndae munhak-kwa Yi T’ae-jun [Contemporary Literature and
childhood, prefer to stress “the motif of the lost home” which permeated Yi Ki-yông’s pre-Liberation works and which allegedly prompted the writer to seek happiness elsewhere. Sin Hyông-gi searches for the reason for the eventual turning of this “apolitical writer” to politics in the “grammar of his narrative” since “grammar is an established institution” which “he could not make – it makes the writer.” The North Korean defector, Pak Nam-su, in his above-cited memoirs explains Yi T’ae-jun’s choice as a result of the cunning strategy of the Soviets who lured the writer to North Korea with special privileges.

Whilst not denying that a grain of truth might be present in each of these speculations, I however doubt that the above-cited reasons played a decisive role in Yi T’ae-jun’s choice. The orphaned childhood and “lost home” experiences were not uncommon in early colonial Korea when life expectancy at birth stood at the mid-20s. Indeed Yi Kwang-su, a rigid anti-Communist writer and publicist, had a similar childhood experience. As for the alleged desire to follow in his father’s footsteps, Yi T’ae-jun was too young to be profoundly influenced by his father’s personality let alone by his political worldview. The very representation of Yi’s choice as unconscious or imposed on him against his will, no matter whether by an “unhappy childhood,” the “grammar of narrative” or by “cunning Soviets” appears too simplistic. In my understanding, these attempts stem from a basic misconception about the alleged “purity” of the writer’s early activity and thus his immanent incompatibility with Communist ideology. In fact the portrayal of Yi T’ae-jun as a “pure writer” who was incompatible with “Communist ideology” reflects the official Pyongyang interpretation of Yi T’ae-jun. According to the official North Korean version, “Yi T’ae-jun conducted subversive activity against the ‘progressive Communist North Korean literature’ and the Great Leader personally and he was punished for that.” It is noteworthy that this scenario in fact equates Communist ideology in North Korean literature with the KAPF


Sin Hyông-gi, “Haebang ihu-ûi Yi T’ae-jun” [Yi T’ae-jun After Liberation], in Kûndae munhak-kwa Yi T’ae-jun, 63-83.

Pak Nam-su, Chôkch’i 6 nyôn pukhan mundan, 122-123.

Han Sông-ok, Yi Kwang-su, pigûkijôk segye insikkwa ch’owôr üjî [Yi Kwang-su, a Tragic Perception of the World and an Extraordinary Will], Seoul: Kônguk tae hakkyo ch’ulp’anbu, 1995, 14-16.

Chang Yong-u, Yi T’ae-jun sosôl yôngu [A Study of Yi T’ae-jun’s Novels], Seoul: T’ae haks, 1996, 260.


668 Interview by telephone with Elena Davydova.
the organization for which, indeed, Yi T’ae-jun never concealed his most negative feelings.

Yet, as we have seen in the previous chapter, the works of one of the most distinguished KAPF writers Yi Ki-yŏng failed to evince a clear understanding of the Marxian doctrine. On the other hand, if we have a close look at Yi T’ae-jun’s figure, we shall see that neither personality nor the early activity of Yi T’ae-jun was irreconcilably antagonistic with Communist ideas per se. His incompatibility with the KAPF and the KAPF-derived North Korean literary bureaucracy is a different story, however.

To comprehend the logic of Yi’s choice and his subsequent failure, we should trace the evolution of his worldview as reflected in his writings. We shall examine three main periods of Yi’s professional life: 1) his pre-Liberation activity, 2) his activity in South Korea in 1945-47, and 3) his activity in North Korea and the campaigns launched against him in Pyongyang. In the process I also think it is useful to compare Yi T’ae-jun as a “loser” with Yi Ki-yŏng as a “winner” in the North Korean “socialist realist” world with respect to their writing and their worldviews.

**Yi T'ae-jun before Liberation**

Yi was born in 1904 in Kangwŏndo province, in the town of Ch’ŏlhwŏn. He lost both his parents in early childhood. His father Yi Mun-gyo, a teacher at a local school and a very educated person by the standards of the day, was an active supporter of the Independence Club and other reformist groups.\(^669\) After the failure of their reformist projects, he decided to emigrate to Japan. The whole family moved with him, but having traveled to Vladivostok in August 1909, the father suddenly died. His widow An Sun-hŭng returned to Korea and tried to support her three children through running a small eatery. She sent Yi T’ae-jun to school where the future writer from the very beginning demonstrated a great interest in learning and was very successful academically.

Unfortunately An Sun-hŭng died in 1912 when Yi T’ae-jun was 8 years old.\(^670\) From that time onwards all the children, ranging from 12 to 4 years old, were forced to rely on the charity of their relatives. The writer later recollected this period of his life as an extremely sad and humiliating experience. The talented boy continued to display great achievement at school, but no-one was interested in his achievements or encouraged him.\(^671\) In 1918 Yi’s uncle pushed the boy to enter an agricultural college,

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\(^669\) A group of scholar officials who urged reform and modernisation from 1870 onwards (See: Keith Pratt and Richard Rutt *Korea, A Historical and Cultural Dictionary*, 187).

\(^670\) Chŏng Hyŏng-gi, *Yi T’ae-jun, chŏngch’i-ro chukkiwa chakka-ro sógi*, 16.

\(^671\) The writer especially recalls how in 1918 he graduated brilliantly from Pongmyŏng school and received, as the best student, various awards – but no relative came to congratulate him. Returning home, the boy threw himself on the ground and started to cry: “Why do I not have a mother!” (Ibid.,17).
but Yi T'ae-jun quit after one month of study and ran away from home, led by the romantic craving “to construct his own world with his own hands.”

Wandering around the country, Yi reached Wŏnsan and found a job in a kaekchuchip, a kind of merchants’ inn which also doubled as a money-lender’s office. While in Wŏnsan he met his maternal grandmother, a small-time shopkeeper, who began to support the boy with great enthusiasm and selflessness. With her aid, Yi could spend more time on his education and read many books, including his favorite Tolstoy in particular. Several times Yi T'ae-jun made plans to travel abroad to China, but every time he was discouraged by the lack of funds. He finally decided to move to Seoul to study, and in 1920 entered Paejae College but could not manage to find the money to pay the enrollment fee. Soon he again received help. This time on a Seoul street he accidentally ran into an old Wŏnsan acquaintance – a merchant, who gave Yi a job in his company so Yi could work in the daytime and study in the evenings at the Ch’ŏngnyŏn hoegwan or Youth Center.

In 1921 Yi entered Huimun College. Again he had difficulty with the enrollment fee, but his grades were so high that the rector of the college offered him a special favor – he granted Yi T'ae-jun an exemption from the fee on the condition that the boy cleaned the rector’s office. It was a lucky break, yet Yi T’ae-jun was not able to fully capitalize on the opportunity. In 1924 he took an active part in a student strike, protesting against the oppression and irrationality of the educational process, and was expelled from the college in June 1924 as one of the ringleaders. However his luck (and the goodwill of the people whom he met) did not run out. With the financial support of a college friend, Yi T’ae-jun travelled to Japan to study. In April 1926 he entered a preparatory Jōchi University in Tokyo, but again he failed to complete his course. Despite the active support of his American teacher in Tokyo, Yi could not bear the material suffering and loneliness of his life overseas. Once again he quit his studies and returned home on November 1927.

All these desperate and seemingly ineffectual perturbations had, however, an important outcome. Around this time Yi T’ae-jun, always an avid reader, started to write his own prose and from that moment until the end of his life this activity constituted the center of Yi’s personal universe. Yi T’ae-jun’s determination to become a writer strengthened during his years at Huimun college, but his first story Omongnŏ was written in Tokyo and published in the Sidae ilbo newspaper on the 13th of July 1925 when Yi was 21 years old. After returning home from Tokyo, Yi T’ae-jun chose the path of a literary man and clung to it with great persistence for the rest of his life. He began to work at the Kaebyŏk publishing house and cooperate with a number of literary magazines.

673 Chŏng Hyŏng-gi, Yi T’ae-jun, chŏngch’i-ro chukkiwa chakka-ro sŏgi, 17.
674 Ibid.,18-20.
Yi T’ae-jun’s literary endeavors proved to be successful from the very beginning. In a matter of years he became one of Korea’s most popular writers. His aesthetically appealing prose made him authoritative enough to be employed in 1932 as a professor of literary composition in Ewha Womens College (Yihwa yǒjón), despite the fact that Yi T’ae-jun had never completed even undergraduate studies. 675

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As we can see, there are many similarities in the early biographies of Yi T’ae-jun and Yi Ki-yǒng. They both lost parents at an early age, suffered poverty and wandered around the country in search of happiness. Both were socially conscious – indeed, Yi T’ae-jun, who once participated directly in a student strike and suffered the consequences, had even more experience of political activity. Both loved reading and strove to seek a profound modern education but could not overcome the obstacles which they faced and accomplish their ambitions. So, there is no surprise that the attitudes and worldviews of both writers had much in common. Indeed, the perspectives of Yi T’ae-jun’s early novels, which were later condemned as “reactionary” in North Korea, and the outlook of the early works of Yi Ki-yǒng, which were later granted a prominent place in Pyongyang’s official canon, were surprisingly similar. Though Yi T’ae-jun, unlike the KAPF members, did not proclaim the “promotion of social reform, national liberation, the abolition of poverty, etc.”676 as the primary goals of his literature, his early writings often demonstrated more social awareness than the contemporary works of Yi Ki-yǒng. And let us not forget the fact that these stories were written when the censorship of the Japanese colonial administration was quite strict, even though much worse times lay ahead. Let us have a closer look at his early writings.

The plot of Yi T’ae-jun’s first work “Omongnyǒ” (1925)677 is roughly as follows:

Omongnyǒ, a young woman and a licentious and selfish person, is cheating on her poor and elderly blind husband. She has an affair with the young but impoverished fisherman Kûm-dol. Her sensuous beauty attracts another man, a policeman called Nam who kills Omongnyǒ’s husband in order to take over his house and his wife as a concubine. Yet the woman rejects Nam and runs away with her young lover.

At first glance what we see here fails to venture beyond the conventions of a banal love story, with its usual “love triangle” or, for that matter, even a “love square”. Yet the social component of the story is too important to be ignored. The miserable, hopeless realities of Korea’s “low depths” are expressed with brutal frankness. The regular tyranny of police officers who “when drunk beat the poor people without exception, curse men who are old enough to be their fathers and consider the street to

675 Ibid., 107.
676 Yun Pyǒng-no, Hanguk kǒn hyǒndae chakka chakp’umro, 19.
be their private property” distances this story of the 21 year old Yi T‘ae-jun from the usual empty romances. It is important that the young writer, while disapproving of the story’s heroine, tries to analyze her motives from a social perspective. The young girl, ignorant and uneducated but full of vigor, raw energy and a zest for life, was sold like an animal, to an old blind man whom she was supposed to serve as her husband. There is no surprise therefore that she rebels against her predicament, striving not just for material well-being, but for her own human freedom as well. Her choice is a poor young fisherman, not a relatively rich and powerful police officer. The same can be said of the fisherman who, being hopelessly poor, cannot afford a normal wedding and falls into the temptation of seducing his neighbor’s wife. On the other hand, the policeman Nam was not depicted as evil incarnate either. He is presented as yet another example of how people unwillingly succumb to the pressure of social circumstance. Nam is not vicious by nature. In fact he is more tolerant of people than his merciless predecessor Pang-ga. But, entering the policeman’s world where brutality to commoners is the norm, Nam must play by these rules.

Rather than being a sensual love story, “Omongnyŏ” is a sorrowful depiction of the moral degradation and decay of Korea’s social order. If we compare “Omongnyŏ” with Yi Ki-yŏng’s “Elder Brother’s Secret Letter”, we must admit that the social dimension of Yi T‘ae-jun’s first work is not only deeper, it is also politically more risky and daring: after all, Yi T‘ae-jun did not simply preach women’s equality as Yi Ki-yŏng did, but criticized the police brutality and the desperate poverty of Korean society. Deliberate or not, Yi T‘ae-jun’s first short story remained closer to the leftist worldview than the first story of the would-be “pillar of socialist realism”.

This sharp social criticism remained characteristic of the subsequent writings of Yi T‘ae-jun. His works of the late 1920s were devoted to various themes. The long-awaited reunion of the poor father and his son is ruined by a sly and vicious policeman in “Happiness” (“Haengbok”) (1929); the promising student hero is too weak to liberate his first love, a beautiful girl who had lost both her parents and saw no choice but to sell herself to a brothel in “The Shadow” (“Kŭrimja”) (1929); in the double-standards of Korean society, an aging kisaeng suffers from poverty and is despised by the very people who had once exploited her (“Kisaeng Sangŏri” (1930), etc. Through the melancholic mood of the narrative and a genuine sympathy for the losers who are often powerless intellectuals, the social aspects of the problems clearly emerge in Yi’s stories.

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678 Ibid., 394.


681 Yi T‘ae-jun, ”Kisaeng Sandori”, in Ibid., Vol. 4: 35-44.
Some South Korean scholars specifically stress the “nationalistic themes” in Yi T’ae-jun’s early writings. Indeed, the motif of a deprived Korean people and an oppressed national pride frequently made its appearance in his stories. In this regard they were not very different from the above-cited works of Yi Ki-yŏng. Yet unlike Yi Ki-yŏng with his anti-urbanism and idealization of pre-industrial, pre-colonial Korea, Yi T’ae-jun did not consistently equate virtue and truth with the norms, real or imagined, of the traditional rural Korean community. Though he, like Yi Ki-yŏng, portrayed the reality of contemporary Korea as a national disgrace and expressed compassion towards the victims of colonial modernization (poor kisaeng, wretched peasants, jobless Confucian scholars etc), Yi T’ae-jun does not offer us clear-cut answers to the questions “who is to blame” and “what is to be done”. His interpretation is complicated and multi-dimensional. Let us examine a few examples of Yi T’ae-jun’s view of the national problem.


The heroine S, an educated heiress of a rich family, is besieged with young men eager to become her husband. But none of them please her. The educated girl is waiting for an honest, noble, principled person, while what she sees around her is only the scum of a wildly capitalizing Korean society: “The son of a prime minister! Those Korean ministers who are all covered in faeces and whose honour is so dishonourable!”; “Today the Korean people are throwing away their human pride like useless old shoes”. Finally the girl meets the poor yet noble man of letters, T., and marries him – only to find out that they need the very money she had cursed as the root of all things evil. After several unsuccessful attempts to earn an income through honest labor T. unwillingly considers an offer which both view as dishonourable – service in some administrative body which “though not the police, treats the Korean people in a similar way”. The couple understands that it would be a betrayal of their principles and S. sadly contemplates the situation. Why do Korean people always have to choose between poverty and disgrace when Westerners simply enjoy their living?

“She compared the lives of Korean people and Westerners. There are no barricades in the Westerners’ way. When it is cold, they use steam heaters. When it is hot they use fans. At night they can enjoy watching the beautiful stars and lying in comfortable beds. In the morning ham or sausages are waiting for them, prepared for them many miles away in New York or Paris. Wherever they go there is no place in the world where they face personal or national humiliation.

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682 Chang Yŏng-u, Yi T’ae-jun sosŏl yŏngu, 260.
684 Ibid., 47, 54.
685 Ibid., 58.
When their children are born schools and work-places are ready for them. God
did not spread His blessings evenly. What blessings do Korean people have?  

Despite her chagrin, the girl decides to overcome “the curse of marriage”,
fight for an honest family life side by side with her husband and not to fall into
the trap of material temptation.

Interestingly, although “The Curse of Marriage” contained sharp criticism and
lamentations over the loss of national and personal pride of Koreans under the pressure
of an emerging capitalism and a repressive colonial regime, the idea of a “blessing” in
the story was associated with steam heaters, comfortable beds and delicious sausages –
the products of the very capitalism whose arrival in her country the heroine (and,
perhaps, the author) condemned. The author, like Yi Ki-yŏng, obviously did not see the
connection between the Korean capitalist fortunes made by “bad people” who “are all
covered in faeces” and the idea of the desirable and much coveted “progress” which
allowed Westerners to live in prosperity, enjoying freedom and modern luxuries.

Another of Yi’s storiéd from this era bears a title which is quite reminiscent of his
contemporary Yi Ki-yŏng’s works, namely “Native Land” (“Kohyang”) (1931).

A young Korean man Kim Yun-gŏn had recently returned home after
spending six years studying in Tokyo. All these years the enthusiastic boy had
devoted himself to the rigors of study and was eager to invest his newly acquired
knowledge and talent in the development of his native country. Yet now he feels
deeply disappointed in Korea “which had changed beyond all recognition”. The
Korean people whom Kim met in the boat were miserable workers returning
home from Japan where they had slaved for a pittance. They were Korean
peasants who had lost their lands – a frightened, pitiful and helpless crowd of
people in ‘ugly national costumes which do not fit them at all’. Observing them
Kim thinks, “Is this really the attire of a people with a brilliant national culture
and history?” Kim is distressed by the gloomy and suspicious policemen who
are ‘watching you as if you have done something wrong’, the barren Korean hills
deprived of forests and the whole “atmosphere of tears and anxiety, which is the
atmosphere of the land of Korea”.

His schoolteacher colleagues are apathetic and not particularly willing to socialize with him. One of his schoolmates who
had once been a school activist is in prison, accused of a political crime. Upset
about what he sees around him, Kim gets drunk and embarks on a night of wild
debauchery — only to end up in a police station.

The depiction of a Korean student who returned from Japan only to find
disillusionment at home was quite popular in the contemporary Korean literature. We
can find this theme in Yi Ki-yŏng’s “Poor People”, Native Land, “Poor Village” and
many other writings of the period. Most of Yi Ki-yŏng’s stories describe the shameful

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686 Ibid., 59.
688 Ibid., 68.
689 Ibid., 69-71.
present of a country which is presented as a result of the rejection of the traditional Korean culture and its values. The protagonist of Yi Ki-yŏng’s *Native Land* found remedy for the social ills of his native village in the restoration of its lost traditional past, and the *ture* leagues in particular. In contrast, Yi T’aе-jun’s novel did not suggest any tried and true social recipes. While the protagonist was not inspired by the social changes in the country, he also does not harbor any illusions about Korea’s old culture. He perceived the traditional Korean costumes as something awkward and incompatible with modern times and as another expression of Korean backwardness.

“Planting Flowers” (“Kkoch' namu-nŭn simŏ nohko”) (1933) is a third story which deserves analysis in this short review of Yi T’aе-jun’s early work. The plot of the story is as follows:

The peasant Pang family had moved to a city after they lost their land which had been confiscated by a Japanese company. The Pangs are naive peasants who are frustrated and helpless in the new hostile environment. The big city is full of insidious and cold people and the unsophisticated rustics are immediately snared by their barbs. Pang’s wife falls victim to a treacherous pimp and his sickly little daughter who has lost her mother dies in Pang’s arms. Pang has no choice but to watch her helplessly since he has no money to pay for his daughter’s medical treatment. Pang curses the cruel world and seeks relief in bouts of heavy drinking.

The author recalls the Pangs in the past, in their native village. In their so-called "natural state" the Pang family was confident and skilful, hard-working and trustworthy. Their former Korean landlord was kind and intelligent, so “the peasants had never felt the land had not been their own”. The final scene in the story is symbolic and has been often cited by critics. Wandering the streets of the city in spring, a devastated Pang sees a young delicate Japanese girl admiring a flowering tree, the same kind of tree he had planted in his village before he had left it. Though the tree is beautiful, Pang feels a deep sadness. He no longer has a right to the beauty of nature – the refined Japanese "city girl" now owns it.

The main thrust of the story did not differ much from the traditionalist views of Yi Ki-yŏng. The bucolic depiction of the rural past of the hero is especially recognizable – the whole scene is vividly reminiscent of the imagined paradise of Seoulite in Yi Ki-yŏng’s “Poor Village”. The depiction of the good-hearted Korean landlord in Yi T’aе-jun’s story is particularly significant. It appears as a symbol of an uncorrupted, pure Korean life and a vanishing golden past – a Utopia which contradicts the widely acknowledged realities of pre-modern Korean village life. Once again, this “good landlord” is reminiscent of Yi Ki-yŏng’s kind and sophisticated “yangban of the olden days”. In this story Yi T’aе-jun obviously fell victim to the idealization of the past à la Yi Ki-yŏng even though he expressed different views elsewhere.

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Nonetheless, these occasional bouts of traditionalism proved atypical for Yi T'ae-jun. In “Country Bumpkin” (“Ch’ontūgi”) (1934), another story which depicted a poor peasant in the merciless city, the old days are much less idealized. The protagonist recollects his past life in a small mountain village where people, because of a lack of suitable land, were traditionally forced to rely on odd jobs to feed their families. The protagonist describes this life as “extremely poor”. Yet he stresses that in the past “nobody in his village died of hunger, nobody begged”.\(^{691}\) This judgment at least appears a little more balanced.

As we can see, the social analysis of the so-called “national problem” in Yi T’ae-jun’s stories is far from complete and consistent. Given the wide range in the social status of his heroes it is quite natural. A returned student from Japan, a poor peasant and the educated daughter of a rich family all see the social situation from different angles and perceive it differently. Yet all of them are frustrated and concerned about the future of the modernizing Korea, and this could be perceived as the position of the author. The critical social messages of these stories leave no doubt about the deep engagement of Yi T’ae-jun in the social problems of his country.

Here we approach the main paradox of Yi T’ae-jun’s pre-Liberation biography. “Planting Flowers”, “Country Bumpkin” and his other socially critical works were written at a time when Yi T’ae-jun was involved with the so-called “Nine Member Club” – a literary group which is invariably presented as the epitome of “pure art” in Korea. By definition the “pure art” tendency implies the complete emancipation of a writer from the social and political issues of his day and an exclusive concentration on the refinement of aesthetic aspects of his work.\(^{692}\) How can we reconcile the palpable social criticism of Yi T’ae-jun’s writings with the supposed demands of his leanings towards pure art? To clarify this we should take a closer look at Yi’s “Nine Members Club” period.

The most widely cited version of events maintains that in August 1933 the thirty year old Yi T’ae-jun, together with Pak T’ae-wŏn, Yi Hyo-sŏk, Yi Sang and a few other writers, established the so-called "Nine Members Club" or Kuinhoe in order to protect the true artistic values of Korean literature from the claims of leftist activists. The KAPF is known to be the primary target of the “Nine Members Club”.\(^{693}\)

However, the memoirs of one of the members of the “Nine Members Club”, Cho Yong-man, shatters this theory. According to Cho, the significance of the group and the consistency of its program was grossly exaggerated after Liberation. What is now called the “Nine Members Club” in fact represented a loose group of intellectuals who occasionally spent some time together chatting about literary matters. Yi T’ae-jun as the most authoritative figure in this circle, used to preside over the gatherings but the

\(^{691}\) Yi T’ae-jun, “Ch’ontūgi” [Country Bumpkin], in Wŏlbul chakka’i taep’yo munhak sŏnjip, Pak T’ae-wŏn, Yi T’ae-jun, 436.

\(^{692}\) For materials on Korea’s “pure art” movement read Yun Pyŏng-no, Hanguk kŭn hyŏndae chakka chakp’umron, 18-20.

\(^{693}\) Min Ch’un-hwan, “Yi T’ae-jun-ŭi chŏngijŏk koch’al”, 45; Chong Hyong-gi, Yi T’ae-jun, chŏngch’i-ru chukkiwa chakka-ro sŏgi, 19.
most active member was the poet Yi Sang, who, being unemployed at the time, used
the group activity to promote himself in the literary world. Cho claims that the group
had no fixed program and that its determination “to protect literature from the arrogant
political intruders” found its expression only in the occasional verbal outbursts of its
members. “Nine Members” indeed exhibited a tendency to despise particular members
of the KAPF whose literary accomplishments were quite modest in comparison with
their loud political declarations. This is not surprising since the KAPF’s ambitions
which were supported by extremely minimal artistic credentials, irritated many
contemporary intellectuals regardless of their political persuasion. Yi T’ae-jun, a
distinguished and wholly devoted writer, used to treat the majority of KAPF writers
with open contempt as good-for-nothing impostors. On the other hand, the KAPF
activists and Han Sŏr-ya in particular, greatly envied the successful Yi T’ae-jun.\footnote{694}

It is worth noting that in the famous confrontation between the KAPF and the
“Nine Members Club”, ideological considerations were less significant than
interpersonal relationships. Cho confirms that despite a formal adherence to different
political groups, Yi T’ae-jun invariably supported his friend Yim Hwa, a founding
father and the main ideologist of the KAPF. At the same time Yi T’ae-jun refused to
cooperate with Yi Kwang-su and Yŏm Sang-sŏp, writers with similar views on
literature and also self-proclaimed proponents of “pure art”. Cho Young-man explains
this rejection by the professional jealousy Yi T’ae-jun felt to his more popular
colleagues and a fear of falling in their shade.\footnote{695}

Thus there is reason to assume that the activity of the “Nine Members Club”,
being much less significant and ideologically coherent than it is often described
nowadays, was mostly inspired by personal and factional issues rather than by a steady
political program – just like the personal antipathy towards Yi Kwang-su was the early
incentive for many KAPF writers.\footnote{696} Though both sides, both the “Nine Members
Club” and the KAPF, tended to wrap their mutual animosity in particular
political/aesthetic terms, the actual bone of contention might have lay in the personal
mutual dislike of their respective members.

Indeed, no matter how the writers formulated their artistic credos, the actual
ideological discrepancies between Yi T’ae-jun and the KAPF writers remained minor
as we can see in the example of Yi Ki-yŏng. Apart from some occasional “progressive
passages, filled with dull Communist rhetoric which appeared in the three most militant
Village”, the general picture and intonation of Yi Ki-yŏng’s supposedly “proletarian
writings did not differ much from those of the “purist” Yi T’ae-jun. Both filled their
narratives with the same pathetic, helpless characters (fragile intellectuals, wretched old
peasants, poor country girls etc) who felt unhappy or uncomfortable in the changing

\footnote{694} Interview with Chŏng Ryul.
\footnote{695} Cho Yong-man, “Ch’ago chajonsim kanghan sosŏlga” [Cold and Dignified Literary Man],
in Yi T’ae-jun munhak yŏngu, 409-415.
\footnote{696} Yun Pyŏng-no, Hanguk kŭn hyŏndae chakka chakp’umron,17.
world of a modernizing Korea, but failed to find any escape. This picture was in fact equally divorced from both the Marxian and purist worlviews.

Yet despite all the volatility of their real ideological disparities, the mutual hatred between Yi T’ae-jun and the KAPF proved to have very real and long-lasting consequences. Unfortunately for Yi T’ae-jun it was Han Sŏr-ya, the ambitious and opportunistic leader of the KAPF, who would become the supreme boss of North Korean literature in the early 1950s. Thus the old animosity would resurface and destroy Yi T’ae-jun years later.\(^{697}\)

In the previous chapter we have already mentioned that the late 1930s brought strict censorship regulations of the Japanese colonial regime to Korean literature. Though Yi T’ae-jun did not suffer any personal persecution, he, like the “proletarian writers” of the period, had to adjust to the new demands and downplay the political messages in his writings. In the 1930s, the social criticism in Yi’s works was greatly reduced. His writings took a more inward orientation, being largely devoted to a gloomy psychological soul-searching, with the leitmotif of a fragile human being trapped in a ruthless materialistic world – again, rather similar to the dismal mood of Yi Ki-yŏng’s writings of the period. We can also trace a strong autobiographical tendency in Yi T’ae-jun’s novels of the late 1930s. Here are two examples:

“Raven” (“K kamakui”) (1936).\(^{698}\) The protagonist of this story, a desperately poor writer, lives in a friend’s cottage in the countryside, surrounded by beautiful scenery. He had been lonely until a pretty young girl, an admirer of his novels, begins to visit him. The girl is clever and delicate, and for the old writer she becomes the only soulmate in the whole world. Unfortunately, the girl is terminally ill. Sensing her approaching death, she estranges herself from the living world and her healthy boyfriend in particular. The girl is suffering from a phobia of ravens, the symbols of death. She feels as if their black bodies contain something awful. The old writer is the only person who understands the girl’s fear. He decides to kill a raven to prove that there is nothing special inside the black body of the ugly bird. But it is too late, for the girl has died.

“Story About Rabbits” (“T’okki iyagi”) (1941).\(^{699}\) The protagonist of this story is again a poor writer who is too weak and indecisive to find a way to improve the life of his large family - a pregnant wife and three children. Feeling worthless, the writer simply drinks heavily. His kind and caring wife does not complain but tries to find ways to help the family survive. She suggests that they raise rabbits. The family succeeds at first, but when the rabbits are fully grown, a problem emerges: somebody must slaughter the cute and helpless animals. The writer hates to even think about it, but as the "man of the family" he feels it is his duty to save his pregnant wife from participating in the cruel act. Still he

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\(^{697}\) Brian Myers, *Han Sŏr-ya and North Korean Literature*, 13, 19.


procrastinates until his wife, a timid and delicate woman who once studied in a women's school, loved foreign poems and dreamed of a beautiful and refined life, does it herself. In the final scene she appears with trembling hands soiled with blood, endeavouring to smile in order to console her embarrassed husband.

Though in an artistic style the stories differ a great deal ("Raven" has a strong touch of mysticism while "Story About Rabbits" is quite realistic) the issue they raise is in fact similar: the alienation between the delicate idealist and the crude material world in which he lives. In fact, the motif of the aesthetically appealing but helpless person emerges constantly in Yi T’ae-jun’s writings. Yet "Story About Rabbits" is probably the first work in which the writer clearly pronounces an accusatory verdict on his favorite non-violent intellectual hero. A gentle idealist perhaps, even a spiritually superior human being, but he is worthless when it comes to action. He fails to save his loved ones from the unpleasant challenges of life—be they fear, death or the necessity to kill.

The profound passion of this message is particularly impressive if we take into account the fact that the story is autobiographical. In the image of the protagonist’s wife, Yi T’ae-jun depicted his wife Yi Sun-ok, a gentle, well-educated, peaceful person, who tolerated her husband’s deficiencies and accepted all the changeableness in their life without complaint. To this woman, mother to their five children, Yi always felt gratitude and a sense of guilt.

These stories offer us some clues as to why Yi T’ae-jun who had never been known as a devotee of Communist methodology began enthusiastically to eulogize "revolutionary violence" after Liberation. In all probability, Yi had solved the moral dilemma of admitting the necessity for "violence in order to protect virtue" long before publishing his controversial pro-Communist story "The First Fight" (1948) with its physically strong, self-confident and cruel guerilla characters.

We must now discuss another contradictory facet of Yi T’ae-jun’s biography – his pro-Japanese activity in the late 1930s to early 1940s. Was Yi T’ae-jun indeed a "traitor to the national interest" as was later claimed by North Korea? This question cannot be answered unambiguously.

The history of literature in colonial Korea has left us no upright anti-Japanese literary heroes who would openly stood up against the colonial regime or at the very least, “broke their brushes” in the early 1940s. Indeed, virtually all prominent Korean writers who lived in the country in the late 1930s and early 1940s collaborated with the colonial authorities and published some pro-Japanese texts – a fact which often makes Korean scholars uncomfortable and thus is seldom stated openly and unequivocally. Regardless of their earlier political propensities, “virtually all established writers wrote

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700 The prototype of this heroine is considered to be Yi T’ae-jun’s wife Yi Sun-ok whom he married in 1930 (See: Chong Hyong-gi, Yi T’ae-jun, chôngch’i-ro chukkiwa chakka-ro sōgi, (107).

701 Interview with Chông Ryul; Kim Hong-gyun, “Wŏlbuk chakka Yi T’ae-jun-ŭi t’onggok-ŭi kajŏksa” [The tragic Family History of Yi T’ae-jun, a Writer Went to the North], Wolgan Chwangang, #300, November 2000.
steadily on, adjusting their literature to the demands of the age. Leftist writers showed no more fortitude than their bourgeois and nationalist rivals.”702 We can say Yi T’ae-jun’s pro-Japanese activity was of a moderate level. He rarely produced an open and whole-hearted piece of pro-Japanese propaganda in Yi Kwang-su’s mould. Probably the only example where Yi T’ae-jun noticeably backed the colonial regime is his pro-war propagandist article “One Day in the Support Army Training Camp” (“Chiwiŏnbyŏng hunlyŏnso-ŭi ilil”) which was published in the pro-Japanese magazine Munjang in December 1941.703 Yet this was not typical of Yi. Generally, his “apostasy novels” bore another kind of pro-Japanese message which is easily detectable in “Moonlight Night of Ideas” (“Sasang-ŭi wŏrya”), an autobiographical "newspaper novel", published in Meil Shinbo in 1941.

“Moonlight Night of Ideas”704 is a story about the moral searching of young Song Bin (Yi himself was the prototype), who is studying abroad at a Japanese university. The critic Yang Mun-gyu called the work "a novel of education" or bildungsroman which has clear didactic functions.705 This long novel relates the family history of Song Bin which is strongly reminiscent of Yi's own childhood: the early death of his parents, his suffering and his search for his own path in life. After much spiritual turmoil Song Bin at last discovers the one true course. This is the path of civilization and enlightenment which in the novel are embodied by Japan. In contrast, Korean society and Korean students are generally portrayed as ignorant and backward, though this motif appears not as a central idea but as a rather oblique background pattern in the novel.

In a sense, Yi T’ae-jun’s call for the modernization of his country reminds the similar motive of the “industrial novels” of Yi Ki-yŏng, which, as we have mentioned, leave room for differing interpretations. The pro-Japanese leitmotif of “Moonlight Night of Ideas” can be equally construed as the sincere belief of the author in Korea’s future or as a desire for the progressive and idealistic Korean intellectual to improve the world around him. However, like the works of Yi Ki-yŏng, Yi T’ae-jun’s novels presuppose that the industrial development of Korea would be conducted, by definition, under “positive Japanese influence”, and this point cannot be omitted. Yi T’ae-jun himself did not fail to realize this. In the opinion of some South Korean critics he was ashamed of this occasional support of the colonial regime and this is why the pro-Japanese tendency in his novels proved to be rather short-lived (1939-1941).706 In 1943 Yi ceased all literary activity and moved to his hometown where he remained until Liberation, thus becoming one of the few Korean writers who came close to “breaking

702 Brian Myers, Han Sŏr-ya and North Korean Literature, 29.
703 Yi Myŏng-hŭi, Sanghŏ Yi T’ae-jun munhak segye [The Literary World of Sangho Yi T’ae-jun], Seoul: Kukhak ch'aryowŏn, 1994, 35.
706 Yi Myŏng-hŭi, Sanghŏ Yi T’ae-jun munhak segye, 37; Hanguk myŏngjak tanp'yŏn sosŏl, 263.
their brushes” in the era of greatest repression. The critic Yi Myŏng-hŭi explains this by Yi’s desire to write only in Korean, not Japanese, and to "preserve the Korean language".\textsuperscript{707}

It is notable that this pro-Japanese activity, being unenthusiastic, did not bring Yi T’ae-jun much material benefit. In the late 1930s to early 1940s the lifestyle of this established writer indeed reminds one of the lifestyle of a “pure Confucian scholar”. Yi T’ae-jun lived in poverty, and his only luxury was books which he collected for his entire life and never sold – even in the most desperate of circumstances.\textsuperscript{708}

Concluding the examination of the initial period of Yi T’ae-jun’s literary activity we are able to say that despite the self-perception of the writer as a “purist” and “apolitical”, his writings were characterized by strong social concerns and sharp criticism which set them apart from “pure art” as it is normally understood. The comparison with the writings of Yi Ki-yŏng, a typical representative of the KAPF, shows that the imagery and intonation of Yi T’ae-jun’s short stories brought them extremely close to the actual conventions of what passed for Korean “proletarian” literature. This similarity remained palpable during the most politically challenging period for Korean intellectuals – the mid- and late 1930s. Yet the mutual personal animosity between Yi T’ae-jun and the most “proletarian” of writers, which began in pre-Liberation times, placed an impenetrable barrier between them.

**Yi T'ae-jun after liberation: 1945-46**

The brief period 1945-46 is of singular importance in the history of Korean literature and thought. It was a period of unprecedented political and creative freedom. Old colonial restrictions had been removed while a new set of politically motivated restrictions (Stalinist in the North, “anti-Communist” and right-nationalist in the South) had not yet been imposed on literature. This freedom did have some limitations, especially in the North, but it was still an unprecedented phenomenon, not to be repeated again until the late 1980s with the political liberalization of South Korea. After Liberation Yi, like many other Korean authors, felt a freedom to express his real thoughts, so his writings of this period reveal more about his worldview than his pre-1945 or post-1946 works and partly explain the reasons why Yi eventually chose the North over the South.

A very characteristic novel by Yi in this period is the autobiographic “Around Liberation” (“Haebang chŏnhŭ”) (August 1946)\textsuperscript{709} published first in the South Korean *Munhak* monthly. After Yi moved to North Korea, he immediately received a special literary prize for the book as a "novel of socialist realism".\textsuperscript{710} Some South Korean

\textsuperscript{707} Ibid., 37.

\textsuperscript{708} Interview with Chŏng Ryul; *Hanguk myŏngjiax tanp’yoŏn sosŏl*, Vol 1: 264.


\textsuperscript{710} *Yi T’ae-jun munhak yŏngu*, 421.
critics also call “Around Liberation” "a proletarian novel" and describe its plot as a "story... about a young man, who is desperately looking forward to Liberation... After Liberation... the young man subscribes to a radical ideology and becomes a leader in the socialist literature movement". In reality, “Around Liberation”, one of the best and perhaps the most honest book ever written by Yi T'ae-jun, has little to do with “socialist realism” or “radical ideology”. Instead this is a confessional novel where Yi admits his pro-Japanese activity (though very unwillingly and hesitantly) and his passivity during the colonial period. In this book he also analyses the dilemmas Korean intellectuals faced in the turbulent months which followed the collapse of colonialism. The prototype of the protagonist Hyŏn is Yi T'ae-jun himself.

Hyŏn, an artist who has been pressed to collaborate with the Japanese, feels unhappy and guilty. Once Korea is supposedly free, Hyŏn tries to find truth in the new world around him. Yet he remains frustrated. During conversations with his close friend Kim, an old-fashioned Confucian scholar, Hyŏn figures out the main source of his anxiety. Hyŏn does not really want any foreign political system (capitalism or socialism) to be imposed on Korea. He wants his country to be free and able to choose its own unique path. However he understands that this is impossible under the circumstances where Korea is poor and backward. Hence, there is no choice for Korea but to follow a particular foreign course. As to Yi's (=Hyŏn's) personal attitude, he considers it immoral to remain aloof from real life. Hence there is also no choice for him but to join one side. Hyŏn chooses the Soviet side and joins a pro-Communist literary group, not because he is really "red" (he denies rumors that he "has gone red" when his friend Kim asks him directly about this). It is rather a choice of the lesser evil. Hyŏn chooses the Soviets because the communists, as protectors of the poor and oppressed, are supposed to be closer to the traditional Korean spirit, to its egalitarian principles. Hyŏn hopes that the Soviets will offer the Korean poor more freedom and help, and to prove it he quotes Lenin's words about communist support for all national liberation movements. In comparison, the capitalist Americans in Korea in Hyŏn's opinion behave just like the Japanese in the past and so capitalism offers no hope for a better life for ordinary Koreans. Thus Hyŏn prefers the Soviets because their policy, he believes, will be less harmful to Korean independence. In the final scene Hyŏn casts away his doubts and immerses himself in the new activity of the communist literature union, just as the real Yi did at the time.

The evolution of the fictional Hyŏn mirrored the realities of Yi T'ae-jun’s life. He became increasingly involved with Communist front organizations in literature. Yi T'ae-jun was known to have played a vital role in the South Korean Communist movement. Scalapino and Lee in their account of North Korean communism mention Yi T'ae-jun’s name as the head of the cultural Department of the KCP immediately after Liberation, and later as serving in the temporary Party headquarters under Pak Hŏng-yŏng in Haeju.  

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711 Who's Who in Korean Literature, 522.
712 Scalapino and Lee, Communism in Korea, 282.
713 Ibid., 295.
In late 1946 Yi T'ae-jun moved to the Communist North. Some visiting Soviet journalists provided the following explanation for this move: “Yi crossed the 38-th parallel in order to have an opportunity to finish his novel about Korean students who had been forcibly mobilized into the Japanese army. The patriotic theme of the novel certainly irritates the South Korean publishers”. Even considering all the propagandistic implications of this statement we cannot deny the grain of truth in it. Indeed, Yi T'ae-jun’s conscious choice of the North can be, first of all, explained by his discomfort with the emerging policies of the Syngman Rhee regime.

Yi T'ae-jun in the North: a political transformation.

After moving to the North Yi T'ae-jun, like many other contemporary writers, immediately found himself in a whirlpool of severe factional struggle between three major groups (ex-KAPF members, Soviet Koreans and non-KAPF Southerners) which fought for domination over the North Korean cultural life.

Given Yi T'ae-jun’s post-Liberation teamwork with the Southerners and their political sponsors in the country’s leadership (and especially Pak Hön-yōng) and his long term animosity towards the KAPF, the possibility of Yi joining the dominant ex-KAPF faction was ruled out. These same factors made him a logical recruit for the block of Southerners and Soviet Koreans, and this fact had long-lasting consequences for Yi’s life and career.

The Soviet Koreans, who, as we have mentioned above, were often perceived as aliens by indigenous Koreans, also required Yi’s authority to infiltrate the local intellectual community and win their long battle with the ex-KAPF group. So they helped Yi with the NKFLA (North Korean Federation of Literature and Art) vice-chairmanship in 1948, and this promotion made Yi, who had scarcely ever been efficient in a bureaucratic environment, into an instant high-ranking writer-bureaucrat and a Stalinist apparatchik. As the NKFLA second vice-chairman he enjoyed very substantial power in distributing benefits to his fellow writers. What was even more important, Yi T’ae-jun from the very beginning was constantly encouraged and indulged by the Soviets, who boosted his self-esteem in every possible way. Yi T’ae-jun was immediately nicknamed the “Korean Guy de Maupassant” and this flattering title quickly spread through the North Korean media; his Soviet Korean friends also moved to establish a “society for the study of the works of Yi T’ae-jun”, etc. Yi T’ae-jun, who had always been known as a proud person, responded to this pandering to his ego in a most predictable way. He enthusiastically took on the ideas, values and mentality of his new friends and admirers.

Yet we must stress that the Soviet veneration and support of Yi T’ae-jun was more than just a trick of cunning politicians. Chŏng Ryul, in his interview, recalls Yi T’ae-jun with sincere admiration. Chŏng Ryul mentions an instant sympathy he felt for

714 A. Gitovich and V. Bursov, My videli Koreiu, 90.
715 Brian Myers, Han Sŏr-ya and North Korean Literature, 50.
716 Interview with Chŏng Ryul.
the writer, and refers to Yi’s great talent, his elevated intellectual stature and his more “Westernized” manners which set him apart from his fellow North Korean intellectuals. We may presume that Yi T’ae-jun also shared these same feelings towards his new friends. As we have mentioned before, in the DPRK Soviet Koreans were generally perceived as people of a higher educational level and diverse life experience, and Yi T’ae-jun, being a rather bookish person himself, no doubt appreciated these qualities in his Soviet colleagues.

It is significant that Chŏng finds nothing peculiar in Yi T’ae-jun’s choice of the North. In his opinion this decision was the logical choice for a socially concerned Korean intellectual. The South Korean regime did not enjoy much support among the critical intellectuals of the day. The nascent South Korean government was seen as corrupt and eager to employ former Japanese collaborators, while the North was associated with romantic images of the brave guerilla leader Kim Il Sung, Yan’an exiles and exotic Soviets whose culture had been popular in Korea long before Liberation. Also, in Chŏng’s opinion, Yi T’ae-jun was greatly influenced in his choice of the North by a similar decision of the famous Korean writer and his elderly friend, Hong Myŏng-hûi.

Chŏng Ryul gives us an interesting account of Yi T’ae-jun’s personal attitude to the Communist ideology. In his opinion, Yi was attracted to Communism for purely idealistic reasons. He was never interested in the political or economic viewpoints of Marxism but perceived it rather as a desirable moral code. “I like Communism. There is nothing wrong in it. People strive to live by strict moral rules, and I cannot help but respect this desire”. 717 Also, he found particularly appealing some aspects of the Communist program like the equality of people and the liberation of oppressed nations. At the same time Yi, at least orally, insisted on his previous principles of “pure art”. In Chŏng Ryul’s estimation, by the term “pure art” Yi T’ae-jun understood not an actual aloofness of a writer from reality, but his obligation to concentrate, first and foremost, on the aesthetic quality of his writing, not distracting himself with any practical or politically popular considerations. It was, Chŏng claims, Yi’s understandable and praiseworthy desire to do his job in a qualitative and professional manner which led him to stress his “pure art” concept. However, Chŏng Ryul found it necessary to “reeducate” his new friend in a more appropriate Stalinist spirit, to point out to him the long-standing “reactionary” implications of this purist approach to literature. In these discussions with his friend, Chŏng often cited Lenin’s classic saying, known to every Soviet schoolchild: “You cannot live in a society and be free from it”. Yet, despite these minor theoretical disparities (which, moreover, faded quickly the more time Yi T’ae-jun spent with his new friends), Chŏng Ryul did not find Yi’s works and behavior to be in contradiction with Communism.

The active “re-education” of Yi T’ae-jun was conducted not only through his personal friendship with the Soviet Koreans but also through the above-mentioned Moscow-sponsored “educational trip” to the Soviet Union in 1946 and Yi T’ae-jun’s exposure to Soviet literature and arts. In 1946-1947 Yi, who had always been an avid

717 Ibid.
reader, extensively read the “socialist realist” Soviet literature which was at the time being translated into Korean in huge amounts. The influence of this literature soon became palpable in Yi T'ae-jun’s writings.

All these factors contributed to the transformation of this socially concerned yet politically unattached Korean intellectual into a staunch “soldier on the cultural front” eager to serve the new regime. The new role gave Yi T’ae-jun not only material affluence and recognition, but also a sense of purpose and a sturdy system of cohesive spiritual values. Yi T’ae-jun was very prolific at the time, and his writings of the period clearly reflected this new worldview. I will mention some of the more significant examples.

“Father’s Ramie Clothes” (“Abŏji mosi ot”) (August 1946). 718 The protagonist of this story, a young girl named Ch’ang-ok who lives in the newly liberated Seoul with her mother, desperately awaits her father’s arrival. Some 20 years earlier her father, a Korean patriot who fought for the independence of Korea, was forced to flee overseas. Now that Korea was free he was expected to return. However, the father fails to arrive – instead he sends a letter in which he tells his family that he will continue his struggle until the country is “truly and completely independent”. The father assures his family that this will certainly happen in the very near future since “we have got a lot of friends and all the people are on our side”. The letter is an eye-opener. Suddenly Ch’ang-ok realizes that Seoul is indeed not really free: the Americans care more about the well-being of the Japanese than the Koreans; the Korean patriots are discriminated against while the national traitors enjoy social respect and the interests of Korea are not taken care of. Her own family was impoverished to the extent that the father’s best ramie clothes had been taken by a moneylender. The girl feels betrayed, angry and determined to resist.

The political message of the story (anti-Americanism, harangues against South Korean policy, etc) is expressed in relatively moderate terms. In all probability, rather than fulfilling a particular propagandistic task, Yi T’ae-jun here is simply expressing his sincere summation of the current situation. As we are aware, the Seoul administration was unpopular among left-leaning intellectuals for the very reasons outlined in “Father’s Ramie Clothes”. The work preserves the best features of Yi T’ae-jun’s previous works – bright images, detailed depictions of scenery, and a well developed story line. The characters are portrayed realistically: neither super-heroes nor jet-black villains can yet be found in “Father’s Ramie Clothes”. Still, all this is not surprising given the time when the story was written – just a month after Yi T’ae-jun chose the North and moved there.

His next novel, however, “The First Fight” (“Ch’ŏt ch’ŏnt’u”) (1948), displays a dramatic change in his style and perspective.

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A small Communist guerilla band operates somewhere in South Korea. The band includes eight guerrillas led by Kwon Pan-dol, a former railway worker from Ch'unch'on factory who joined the guerrilla movement after the so-called “October Struggle” – a wave of Communist-inspired strikes and riots in 1946. One particularly zealous fighter who follows Kwon everywhere and listens to his every word is called "The Third". "The Third" is a young brother of Kwon's fallen comrade Kyông-su who was shot while trying to escape from prison. The group fights a certain ill-defined assortment of "dirty bastards" who had "sold the country to the Syngman Rhee clique" as well as the perennial "American bastards". The fighters do not hesitate and are determined to kill the wicked enemies. The only person who at times expresses doubts about the success of their enterprise is doctor Yun, the lone intellectual in the novel. However Yun’s perplexities soon fade away when the proletarian commander Kwon reminds him of the exemplary bravery which was demonstrated by “Marshal Kim [Il Sung]” while fighting the “Japanese bastards”. Though the guerrillas are small in number and this is their first fight, they win easily and without losses. Only "The Third", young and impatient, is wounded slightly because of his brave but reckless actions. The victorious guerrillas organize a "people's trial" of the "dog-shit bastards". The victims try to appeal to the nationalistic feelings of the guerrillas “as Koreans”, but their pleading makes our heroes only laugh because they, like communists and the exploited, are free from such “reactionary” feelings. Revolutionary justice is served and the guerrillas move on to new battles and, presumably, new victories.719

“The First Fight” is vastly different from anything ever produced by Yi T’ae-jun previously. Only a few formal traits of Yi T’ae-jun’s earlier writings are traceable in the novel – an attention to scenery and a detailed depiction of the nature and psychological state of the heroes. On the whole, however, “The First Fight” is a far cry from the earlier works of Yi T’ae-jun. It represents a typical “iron-style” "partisan novel" of the socialist realist vein, with tough heroes who are free from doubt in their pursuit of victory. The characteristic trait of this new style is an abundance of expletives which is certainly anomalous to the elaborate and subtle writing style of Yi T’ae-jun’s earlier works. This style is no doubt an expression of the writer’s explicit intention to “stay close to the masses” and “promote popular spirit” as his Soviet colleagues once recommended.

Unlike the hesitant and soul-searching protagonists of Yi’s pre-Liberation stories, the positive heroes of “The First Fight” kill easily and eagerly – and their victims are no rabbits. In many respects “The First Fight” is visibly reminiscent of the source of Yi’s inspiration—the novel of the Soviet writer Fadeev Devastation (Razgrom),720 which also depicted the tribulations of a guerilla band. The similarity is palpable not only in the story line, but in the general formula as well. Just like in

720 Fadeev, Razgrom [Devastation], Moscow: Hudozhestvennaia literatura, 1972.
Fadeev’s work, in “The First Fight” the leader is an experienced party cadre, while his young subordinates are enthusiastic and impatient. Like Devastation’s protagonists, Yi’s positive heroes justify their actions by “revolutionary humanism”, which in fact sees brutality as a necessary measure to deal with one’s enemies for the sake of revolution/liberation. The depiction of intellectuals is also very similar and characteristic. Yi T’ae-jun here follows the convention of “class view” in Soviet literature according to which an intellectual can never possess “true revolutionary consciousness”. Yi T’ae-jun depicts the only intellectual in the novel, the doctor, as a comrade with good intentions but lacking due political awareness such that the superior proletarian leader has to correct him – just like Fadeev’s novel where the Communist commander Levinson also has to set the hesitating and uncertain doctor right.

One can easily understand the frustration and confusion some South Korean scholars feel about the sudden turn in Yi T’ae-jun’s imagery and intonation. Scholarly opinions fluctuate between righteous condemnation to bewilderment and regret at Yi’s transformation. Chang Yǒng-u, for example, claims that only outside pressure could have made Yi write “The First Fight”: "It was a work of inertia, written not by the author’s choice, but under outside pressure".  

This sounds too simplistic. “The First Fight” became the first visible result of Yi’s “reformation”, his conversion to the Communist spirit as understood in that time and place. This process would hardly have been successful without Yi T’ae-jun’s own active participation, favorable predisposition and aspiration to be “reformed”. After all, this was still a time when one could still take a step backwards. While not denying the existence of external pressures (for example the prescribed themes which we have mentioned in the previous chapter), we have reason to suspect that Yi T’ae-jun succumbed to these without much protest.

Indeed, his writings of the late 1940s seem to confirm that Yi tried hard to adjust to the new requirements and to realize them in his works as best as he could.

“Tiger Grandma” (“Horangi halmoni”) (1949) is a short story about the illiteracy eradication movement in a small and remote Korean village.

The story’s protagonist is a conservative old woman who had received the nickname Tiger Grandma for her tough, grumpy and outspoken personality. Tiger Grandma is an influential figure among the village women, so her strong opposition to adult education at first frustrates the young and inexperienced communist educator Sang-gǔni who conducts the village study program. Tiger Grandma discourages other women from participating in the study courses, and Sang-gǔni worries that the study program will not be successfully completed. Yet Tiger Grandma is not as conservative as she pretends to be. She is, in fact, quite

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721 Chong Hyong-gi, Yi T’ae-jun, chǒngch’i-ro chukkiwa chakka-ro sŏgi, 100-101.
723 Yi T’ae-jun, “Horangi halmóni” [Tiger Grandma], in Yi T’ae-jun munhak chŏnjip, Vol.3: 105-120.
curious about the new realities but is too proud to reveal her interest. So the young communist makes a psychologically convincing decision – he allows this informal leader to officially head the women’s study group and in this way he eventually wins her enthusiastic support. At the end of the story the strong-headed woman becomes literate enough to write a letter to her grandson Yŏng-dol who is serving in the People’s Army. She asks her grandson to perform his duties diligently and relay her greetings to Marshal Kim.

The bucolic sweetness of this story, with its naïve simple-minded heroes and unsophisticated folk humor, is also atypical of Yi T’ae-jun. In all probability, all these changes constitute once again an attempt to implement “popular spirit” in literature. In general, the naïve rural image of Tiger Grandma is strongly reminiscent of the image of Grandpa Shchukar in Sholokhov’s *Virgin Land* – a work about the agrarian reform in the Soviet Union, which, as we have mentioned earlier, was deemed exemplary in the North Korean literary world. Like Grandpa Shchukar, Tiger Grandma represents the syrupy image of a humorous rural elder who, despite her age, zealously supports the new regime.

Another story of the same period is “Somewhere Near the 38th Parallel” (“38 sŏn önū chigu-esŏ”) (October 1949).724

Simple peasants living near the 38th parallel experience turmoil caused by the “American bastards” and the “South Korean clique”. These “bandits” constantly organize raids and burn the forests in an attempt to obstruct the happy and peaceful life of the newly liberated North Korean people. However the Korean people enjoy the robust protection of the Communist border guards. One of these guards, comrade Yu Kyŏng-hwan, though wounded in battle did not lose his nerve and managed to cut off the head of the enemy (the latter is yet again quite imprecisely described as a “bastard”). In the final scenes the hero slides into unconsciousness as visions of “the faces of his mother, his father, the portrait of Premier Kim Il Sung and the fluttering banners of the Republic” pass through his mind. His last thought is: “Where is my rifle?”

It is obvious that the author does not care about the psychological persuasiveness of his narrative – this is why the hero visualizes the face of the “great leader” and the “fluttering banners of the Republic” at the most crucial moment of his life. This story marks the beginning of a series of the purely propagandistic writings by Yi T’ae-jun. Short and terse and filled with rude expletives which are addressed at the “enemies” along with an uncritical adulation of Communist heroes, these black-and-white stories lack completely the sophistication of the pre-Liberation works of Yi T’ae-jun. The new works are reminiscent of propaganda leaflets, written with the all too obvious intention of igniting hatred of the enemy. Here are a few more examples of this tendency:

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724 Yi T’ae-jun, “38 sŏn önū chigu-esŏ” [Somewhere Near the 38th Parallel], in *Yi T’ae-jun munhak sŏnjip*, Vol. 3: 121-129.
“One Hundred Times, One Thousand Times” (“Paekpae ch’ónpae-ro”) (April 1951)⁷²⁵ describes the fight of the heroic North Korean soldiers against the cowardly American and South Korean “bastards”. One of the heroes, the young O Ki-ho, dies in battle. When his comrades return to pick up his body, they find the deceased O lying among numerous dead Americans. His hands still grasp his rifle, which means that the hero bravely fought to the very last moment. His comrades pledge to avenge the hero: “for one hundred times, we’ll pay one thousand times”.

“Let’s See Who Will Surrender” (“Nuga Kulbokhanŭnga poja”) (April 1951)⁷²⁶ describes a young truck driver who has no war experience and is frightened during his first battle. Yet, under the positive influence of his commander Kim Yŏng-min, an experienced and confident Communist officer, the driver gathers up his courage and fulfills his battle task. In the end the officer gives the happy young soldier a hug “as if to an old battle comrade”.

“American Embassy” (“Miguk taesagwan”) (1951)⁷²⁷ is especially interesting as a typical example of the war-time anti-American propaganda which often reached a hysterical pitch.

After an American aircraft is shot down, two American “bastards”, a pilot and a gunner, appear amongst the North Korean positions. They carry a letter in several languages with the request to give them food and deliver them to the nearest American embassy. The North Korean soldiers are appalled at the arrogance of the intruders who expect to receive humane treatment after all the atrocities they have committed on Korean soil. Still, the North Koreans feel they must obey the international rules, so they call to divisional headquarters asking what to do with the unwanted guests. After receiving an order to hold them properly until the special servicemen come and pick them up, the Korean soldiers put the Americans in a cell of a former prison where the family members of Korean patriots had been tormented at the hands of the “American and South Korean clique bastards” and which the North Korean soldiers had not yet cleaned. Finding themselves faced with a room full of dead and mutilated bodies, the two "bastards" are scared to death. With trembling lips they ask: “What is this?” to which the ironic answer is: “This is your bloody American embassy!” The cowardly Americans, sure that they will also be tormented, kneel, whine and try to bribe the Korean soldiers with wads of dollar bills only to receive a cold and sturdy rejection: “This is not your bloody America. You can buy your president but not a Korean”. The Americans are told that they would not be killed “because

⁷²⁵ Yi T’ae-jun, “Paekpae ch’ónpae-ro” [One Hundred Times, One thousand times], in Yi T’ae-jun munhak chŏnjip, Vol.3: 131-134.
Koreans respect international law”. But the prisoners are still locked in the awful cell with the words: “Look, what you have done, American butchers. Here is your American embassy. A very typical embassy …”

Yi Ch’ŏl-ju states that this wartime propaganda piece received the highest praise of the Great Leader himself.728

Yi T’ae-jun’s writings of the period, crammed with propagandistic messages, have lost their psychological ambiguity and are impoverished in an artistic sense. The last traces of aesthetic refinement can be seen in “The First Fight” where the characters and scenery are still imbued with some visualisable traits (for which the writer would be severely criticized later). His subsequent works are greatly simplified in language and composition and marked by a disregard for the inner development of his characters.729 Though Yi T’ae-jun’s stories were still marked with a higher artistic quality than most of the writings of his colleagues who were largely ex-KAPF members (and the contemporary critics routinely mention this strong side of Yi’s works),730 Yi’s post-1945 stories were grossly inferior to his earlier writings if judged purely on their artistic qualities. The complicated interpersonal relations and emotionally charged worlds of Yi T’ae-jun’s heroes are narrowed to serve political utilitarianism. Probably the most illustrative in this regard is “The Road to My Native Land” (“Kohyang kil”) (1950), another novel about guerillas. A protagonist in the novel, a guerrilla returning to his native village as an intelligence agent, silently witnesses the sufferings of his family at the hands of the “bastards”. In order to accomplish his mission the agent does not dare reveal his identity and do anything for his family. The hero turns this tragic personal experience into a positive stimulus for further struggle: “He felt he should be enraged at the larger things, should avenge the more important things.”731

This utilitarian approach and propagandistic functionalism of Yi T’ae-jun’s prose was the very thing that the writer was expected to demonstrate. The single attempt of Yi T’ae-jun to deviate from this common line and add a touch of personality to the obligatory propagandistic utterances was quickly spotted and rebuked by the critics. This occurred when he wrote the short story “Dear People” (“Kogwihan saramdŭl”) (1951)732 which dealt with the officially strongly encouraged topic of Chinese-Korean friendship. In this story Yi T’ae-jun tried to flavor the usual political plot with a hint of romance, but it immediately became an object of criticism.

The seriously wounded Chinese volunteer Chin P’yŏng-su is saved by a beautiful Korean nurse named Kim Ok-sil. The girl applies all her knowledge and

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728 Yi Ch’ŏl-ju, Puk-ŭi yesurin, 235.
729 As we have mentioned in the previous chapter, the same is applicable to the post- Liberation works of Yi Ki-yŏng.
730 Interview with Chŏng Ryul; Om Ho-sŏk, Munye kibon, 190, 195.
732 Yi T’ae-jun, “Kogwihan saramdŭl” [Dear People], in Yi T’ae-jun munhak chŏnjip, Vol.3: 147-159.
devotion to caring for the young soldier – she gives him her own blood, remains vigilant at his bedside all night singing Chinese songs, etc. Some romantic feelings begin to develop between them, but unfortunately the girl dies in the subsequent battle trying to save another wounded soldier. After recovering, Chin P’yŏng-su has a long sentimental talk with the Korean commander Pak O-ch’ol who tells him of the heroic life and death of the girl. Chin P’yŏng-su is deeply impressed. He proclaims that the image of the Korean girl Kim Ok-sil “...helped him to understand his own Chinese Liberation Army and Chinese Communist Party better” and to understand “how nobly a person can live”. Chinese and Korean soldiers contemplate together the “noble internationalism” which connects their nations and the future life of their generation which will certainly be peaceful and happy. During the conversation the soldiers take inspiration while looking at a wall which boasts the portraits of their “dearest people”. These are... the leaders of China and North Korea, together with Generalissimo Stalin, of course.

Though in general the story remains sickly “correct” (indeed, it was a supreme Party leader, not a beautiful girl, who claimed the name of “dearest person” in the story) the minor concession to romance did not go unnoticed. The author of “Dear People” immediately received a polite and respectful yet critical reprimand:

“The appearance of this story devoted to the high ideal of Korean-Chinese friendship is a happy event in our literature. But unfortunately the theme of internationalism was expressed through the romantic relationship of the heroes. Of course there is nothing wrong with love itself ... But in this way this urgent political task is turned into a casual melodrama. Despite the perfect artistic quality of this story, we have to stress that romance is not suitable while depicting a lofty political subject”.

Given that, except for “lofty political subjects”, nothing else is deemed worthy of depiction in the North Korean literature of the time, the demagogy of this critical assumption is obvious. While Ôm admits that “there is nothing wrong with love itself” in fact he attacks the slightest hint of romantic feelings in otherwise impeccable Communist heroes. Yi T’aee-jun correctly read the real implications of the critical notion. In his subsequent works he did not permit any romantic frivolity whatsoever.

In any case, in the period between 1946 and 1953, criticism of Yi T’aee-jun was extremely rare. As we have seen, in general the writings of this alleged “purist” fitted perfectly into the propagandistic discourse of the DPRK, and Yi’s prolific endeavors were highly appreciated.

733 Om Ho-sŏk, Munye kibon, 193-195.
Yi T'ae-jun after 1953: the purge and rejection

For all this initial success however, Yi T’ae-jun’s fame and prosperity did not last long. After 1953 he found himself subjected to increasingly severe critical campaigns, conducted by the very same people who had consistently praised him just a few years earlier. Moreover, the works of the writer which had been fervently eulogized, now became objects of harsh criticism. So what was the reason behind this abrupt shift of attitude?

As has been mentioned above, some South Korean scholars are inclined to explain Yi’s tragic fate by his immanent incompatibility with Communist ideology. Yet, as we have just seen, the propagandistic works of the writer show no disparity with the official line. These writings do not demonstrate even the slightest trace of dissent or skepticism towards the official values. In my understanding, the real incompatibility which mattered here was of a different nature. While Yi T’ae-jun was eager to follow the official conventions of North Korean literature, he profoundly misunderstood the unofficial, unspoken rules of the Pyongyang literary world, and that became the reason for his eventual failure.

All informants unanimously recollect Yi T’ae-jun as a person who was deeply immersed in his professional activity and paid scant attention either to his political promotion or to the twists and turns of the factional struggle that engulfed the Pyongyang literary world. Being fully focused on his writings and considering these to be of primary importance, Yi T’ae-jun ignored and even openly mocked the political games which constituted an essential part of a writer’s life in the DPRK of the 1950s.

The Soviet journalist Arkadii Perventsev who visited Pyongyang in 1950 recalls one remarkable episode. During his meeting with the members of the newly created NKFLA, Perventsev became acquainted with Yi T’ae-jun who complained that in North Korea writers had to spend too much time on political and propagandistic activities such as meetings and rallies. This activity, Yi T’ae-jun claimed, became so time-consuming that Korean writers had no time to pursue their professional goals. Yi T’ae-jun presupposed that “in the Soviet Union the situation must be better in this regard”. Predictably, the Soviet journalist rigorously rebuffed the Korean writer and showered him with bombastic Stalinist cliches. He stresses that Yi T’ae-jun underestimated the importance of political activity for a “truly progressive” writer and that it was his honorable duty to be involved in ideological work, etc.

One can only wonder how the 46 year old Yi T’ae-jun who had spent four years in the upper reaches of the Stalinist literary bureaucracy could be naïve enough to share

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prose among the “progressive” works created by writers of “new Korea”. (See: Yi Kí-yŏng “O koreisiko literature” [About Korean literature], Zvezda, 1949, #12, 147-148).

735 Interview with Elena Pak; interview with Chong Ryul, Pak Nam-su, Chŏkch’i 6 nyŏn pukhan mundan, 122-123.

736 Yi Ch’ŏl-ju, Pukhan yesurin, 190-191.

737 A. Perventsev, V Koree, 23.
his politically incorrect, not to say dangerous, views with a visiting Soviet journalist. This might be an indication that Yi did not properly understand the actual politics of the Pyongyang literary world.

Yi T’ae-jun’s daughter recollects another interesting episode.\(^{738}\) When Yi T’ae-jun was exiled, he rejected his family’s suggestion that he promote himself by concocting another novel about the Great Leader. Yi T’ae-jun refused to follow this path of unabashed flattery. He said that he could not compromise his dignity as a writer and that, not knowing Kim Il Sung close enough personally, he could not write a novel about him. This statement did not imply any hostility towards the Great Leader, but certainly testified to a total absence of political flexibility in Yi T’ae-jun – a proud professional and a bad strategist, this is one trait which he did not change even after being purged.

Neither was he good at maintaining politically safe interpersonal relationships or choosing the right side to join. Though Yi T’ae-jun belonged to the Soviet Korean faction and remained close to the Southerners, this was a consequence in the first instance of his personal sympathies rather than any politically astute choice of the most beneficial alliance. Yi T’ae-jun was known as a reserved person who would avoid noisy parties, did not drink much and had polite and restrained manners. He was generous and kind to his close friends (mostly Soviet Koreans and Southerners) whom he liked to entertain in his house, and with whom he liked to enjoy delicious food together and share long pleasant conversations. Yet this circle was rather narrow. Unlike some of his luckier colleagues such as Yi Ki-yŏng or Min Pyŏng-gyun,\(^{739}\) Yi did not successfully interact with the wider community and thus could not strike a balance between the fighting factions on the North Korean literary scene.

Considering literary activity to be the basic measure of a writer’s worth, Yi T’ae-jun continued to ridicule his old foe Han Sŏr-ya for being a dysfunctional writer. Yi obviously missed the point that the political position of the artistically mediocre but ambitious Han was becoming stronger year by year.\(^{740}\) At the same time Yi T’ae-jun openly expressed his sympathy for Yi Ki-yŏng, who though being formal member of the KAPF faction lacked real political weight and therefore would be worthless as an ally or sponsor. According to the recollections of Chŏng Ryul, Yi T’ae-jun sincerely respected this “old man” of the North Korean literary world and loved to talk with him about life and literature.

In short, Yi T’ae-jun underestimated the significance of unofficial connections and petty politicking inside the Pyongyang literary world. Thus his fall from grace was pre-ordained by the failure of the factions which initially protected his political fortunes and represented his interests – the South Koreans and the Soviet Koreans. The ascent of

\(^{738}\) Kim Hong-gyun, “Wŏlbuk chakka Yi T’ae-jun-ūi t’onggok-ūi kajoks’a”, 12.

\(^{739}\) Min Pyŏng-gyun, a poet belonging to the Soviet faction, managed to maintain a good relationship with Han Sŏr-ya. He enjoyed a stable position in the Pyongyang literary world even after the Soviets left Korea. (Interview with Chŏng Ryul).

\(^{740}\) Interview with Chŏng Ryul.
the faction of his long term enemy Han Sŏr-ya after 1953 and the weakening of the positions of his friends, the Southerners and Soviet Koreans, made the shift in Yi T’ae-jun’s fortunes just a question of time.

In the next chapter we will analyze the factional struggle in the North Korean literary world in greater detail. For the moment I would like to touch on the particulars of the formal accusations which led to the eventual purge of Yi T’ae-jun.

A noisy accusatory campaign against Yi T’ae-jun began in 1953. It was conducted by critics who constituted Han’s close friends and political allies – Ôm Ho-sŏk, Han Hyo, An Ham-gwang, Hong Sun-ch’ŏl and other representatives of the ex-KAPF faction. Earlier these critics had already contemplated attacks on Yi T’ae-jun and his removal from the literary scene, but these early unsuccessful attempts were largely limited to backstage intrigues. In each instance the Soviet backers managed to protect Yi T’ae-jun. By 1953 the situation had changed considerably and the long-term rivals managed to produce a torrent of defamatory articles against Yi T’ae-jun aimed at destroying the writer.

To comprehend the spirit of this campaign we might look at an article by Yi T’ae-jun’s primary “literary executioner” Ôm Ho-sŏk entitled “The reactionary in Yi T’ae-jun’s literature” (Yi T’ae-jun-ŭi munhak-ŭi pandongjŏk ponjil). The article was first published in 1956 and then reprinted in 1961 in Literature and the Spirit of Modernity (Munhak-kwa hyŏndaeh ch’ongsin). This work represents a typical example of Stalinist political criticism in its North Korean incarnation – personally abusive, unsubstantiated, illogical and often plainly hysterical. Here are a few quotations from the work.

“From the very first day when Yi T’ae-jun crawled into North Korea he never missed a chance to establish himself in the North Korean Federation of Literature and Art where he began to search for henchmen. He conspired with Pak Ch’ang-ok, Ki Sŏk-pok, Chŏn Tong-hyŏk, Chŏng Ryul (all of whom were Soviet Koreans and who were once prominent in literary politics – T.G.) and others and indecently engaged in subversive activity within the NKFLA.”

“In the past Yi has written many novels about love – that is, pornographic novels. How could he consider himself to be a “pure artist”?”

“Coming to the North, Yi took off the mask of “purity” and took on the mask of realism instead. He camouflaged himself as a progressive writer. But his essence was the same under the mask of “purity” or realism. His true character is ugly naturalism and this has never changed. When he wrote wearing the mask of “purity”, his literature was naturalistic. And when after Liberation he

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741 Pak Nam-su, Chŏkch’i 6 nyŏn pukhan mundan, 117.
743 Ibid., 443.
744 Ibid., 444.
switched to the mask of realism, his ugly face under this new mask was that of a naturalist who continued to frown and grin."

Accusations against Yi fell into two broad categories. The first group included indictments connected with his pre-1945 literary activities. Note how Yi’s past is presented in the articles of Hong Sun-ch’ǒl and An Ham-gwang:

“All the pre-Liberation activity of Yi T’ae-jun is simply artificial rubbish... Yi T’ae-jun viciously strove to prove that the perfect works of the KAPF writers were worthless... Bourgeois ideology permeated all the works of Yi T’ae-jun before Liberation. They all aimed at one goal – distracting the Korean people from the anti-Japanese struggle... Hysterically striving to repudiate the political and ideological content of art, Yi T’ae-jun countered the traditions of true realism of the KAPF, madly and wildly propagating the ideas of “pure art”. The heroes of his literature became bourgeois intellectuals, lechers, dirty kisaeng and other useless people... The heroes of his first story “Omonnyŏ” are deeply licentious people. Through their images the author represents the Korean nation as immoral”.

“Yi T’ae-jun chose to depict only lowly subjects—depraved people or dreamy youth driven by desperation ... He is certainly nothing but a reactionary bourgeois writer who insisted on the separation of form from content in literature. He organized the reactionary Nine Members Club in order to fight with the KAPF which produced healthy people’s literature and he tried to destroy the development of such literature. In fact he is a totally ignorant person...”

Note how easily the critics resort to personal denunciations such as “totally ignorant person”, “wildly propagating”, “hysterically striving” etc, how they mount accusations without bothering to present any proof. What was even more important, the critics demonstrated a stunning double standard. While attacking Yi for his collaboration with the Japanese, the critics did not mention the fact that virtually every major Korean writer, including all the ex-KAPF members, in the early 1940s collaborated with the colonial authorities to various degrees and occasionally published pro-Japanese works. Even those who had professed radical pro-Communist ideas before the mid-1930s could not resist the Japanese oppression when the pressure began to mount after 1937, and some of them in the later colonial era, like Han Sŏr-ya for example, were notorious for their sycophantic zeal.

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743 Ibid., 453.
745 An Ham-gwang, “Munhak-ui kyegupsŏng” [Class Consciousness in Literature], in Munhak-ui chihyang [Literary tendencies], Pyongyang: Chosŏn chakka tongmaeng ch’ulp’ansa 1954, 3-41.
747 Brian Myers. Han Sor-ya and North Korean Literature, 143-156.
Accusing Yi of being passive during the Japanese colonial period, the critics again simply ignored the fact that a passive approach was very common among the Korean intellectuals of the period. Indeed, the idea of the passive suffering of noble but helpless protagonists as a vehicle to express an author’s dissatisfaction with the world around them was wide-spread in the Korean literature of the colonial period. The KAPF’s “healthy people’s literature” was no exception either. As excellent examples one will recollect Han Sŏr-ya’s “Transition Period” (“Kwadogi”) (1929) or Yi Ki-yŏng’s “Poor Village” (“Minch’ŏn”) (1925) which we have discussed in the previous chapter. These highly praised works of supposedly “progressive” KAPF writers are filled with the same apolitical pastoralism, melancholic lamentations about the good old days, a dislike of modernity and urban life, etc which An condemns in Yi T’ae-jun’s works.

In addition, note the demagogic nature of the criticism in respect of “Omonnyŏ” where the licentious behavior of the heroine is presented as no less than national humiliation for all Koreans – despite the fact that Yi T’ae-jun clearly and unequivocally expressed his disapproval of the heroine. Again, the double standard is apparent – Yi Ki-yŏng’s first piece of fiction also dealt with a womanizing hero, but the story met with no criticism at all and has remained a part of the official North Korean literary canon to this day.

Another set of accusations which was directed at Yi T’ae-jun’s post-Liberation works including “The Road to My Native Land”, “The First Fight” and “Tiger Grandma” seemed even more groundless and absurd. If one is able to find in Yi’s pre-Liberation works (or in the KAPF works of the period) some tendencies or ideas which, indeed, contradicted the North Korean state ideology, then the post-1945 works of Yi failed to demonstrate even a shadow of dissent from the official line. Nevertheless they also became the objects of harsh criticism. Here are a few examples.

A large part of the above-mentioned harangue by Ōm Ho-sŏk is devoted to the condemnation of Yi T’ae-jun’s “Tiger Grandma”, a story about the reforms in the North Korean countryside during the early years of Communist rule. Tiger Grandma, as we will recall, was intended to be a comic folkloric character, the embodiment of rural naivete and archaic prejudice, but at the same time it was also meant to symbolize the popular support allegedly enjoyed by the new regime. However, Ōm reinterpreted her as a vicious enemy, representing “a political opposition to the Party”. Ṯi Ṭi deliberately overlooked the fact that in the final scene of the story this alleged “class enemy” sent her heartfelt greetings to the Great Leader himself. The critic claimed that Yi harboured hidden malicious intent when he depicted how one person’s opposition to the collective may threaten the whole study program. According to the accuser, Yi allegedly wanted to convince readers that “one person is stronger than a collective and hence the Communist party has no influence”. Ṭi Ṭi emphasized that Tiger Grandma

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750 For an account of the works by Han Sŏr-ya and other KAPF writers see: Brian Myers, ibid., 25-26.

751 Ōm Ho-sŏk, “Yi T’ae-jun-ŭi munhak-ŭi pandongjŏk ponjil”, 459, 467-470.

752 Ibid., 460-461.
leads the women’s group not because of her willingness to study but in order to gain more power. Such a stubborn and uneducated person cannot be a leader of the whole village, Ôm asserted:

“Let us consider the type of person Tiger Grandma is. She is the embodiment of stubbornness, she is an illiterate person, confined to the darkness of superstition. She ensnares the village women with her superstitions, and the author depicts the village women as coming to her on a daily basis to call on her “wisdom”. It means that in this village the arbitrator with the wisdom to solve all the difficult problems is Tiger grandma, the embodiment of superstition and illiteracy. Hence the village women who depend upon this superstition are illiterate and superstitious persons themselves, and the entire 20-family village is not only a den of unlettered people, but also a dark coven of superstition. In 1949 after the great success of the Cultural Revolution and land reform, the spirit of our peasants has risen to a high level. They rely in their daily lives upon solid political rights and cast aside even the faintest shadow of demons with hereditary feudal customs. To depict at this time a whole village still soaked in the dark world of superstition is a fabrication .... It is impossible to find such a person in 1949.”

Thus, according to Ôm, Yi’s unpardonable sin was that he depicted an illiterate village of 20 families in 1949, while, as Ôm claims, illiteracy was completely eradicated in 1948 all over North Korea. It is obvious that the claim to have eradicated illiteracy and traditional superstition so quickly was a far cry from the real situation in Korea.

“The First Fight” and “The Road To My Native Land” also received a high appraisal at first, but in the early 1950s they were criticized for alleged “defeatism”. Ôm particularly accentuated one scene in the novel – a scene of a “people’s court”. The guerrilla leader, acting as an impromptu tribunal chairman, asks villagers whether the defendant is guilty or not. In response, the mother of the criminal shouts loudly: “He is not guilty!” but she is a lone voice. All other villagers fail to join her and initially maintain an awkward silence. They support the accusation and hate the traitor, but feel uneasy at judging their neighbor. Against the backdrop of politicization and "ideological correctness" in the story, this scene is refreshingly vital and psychologically plausible. The villagers behave according to traditional Korean moral norms which require that they be polite and “save the face” of a fallen opponent (especially since the mother of the enemy is crying at the time). Yet the very vitality of this scene became the pretext for a critical attack. Ôm claimed that by their silence the peasants demonstrated their hidden hostility to the guerrillas and to Communist power and their support for the traitors: “The villagers don’t listen to the guerilla leader and by their silence they even support the cries of the reactionary element’s mother... In this novel Yi showed that the villagers did not support the guerillas and sympathized with

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753 Ibid., 460-461.
754 Ibid., 460-462.
755 Ibid., 467.
the enemy. The author himself through the reactionary element’s mother’s cry of “Not guilty!” reveals his own position and claims that the enemy is not guilty”. Óm did not mention the fact that on virtually the next page Yi describes how the public mood was changing – people look at the traitor with “eyes flashing with anger” and shout in response to the guerrilla leader question’s as to whether they can forgive the enemy: “No!”, “He must be killed!”

Óm also found alleged anti-Guerrilla tendencies in another pro-Communist novel, “The Road To My Native Land” (“Kohyang kil”) (1952). This time his accusations were aimed at the scene where the guerrilla protagonist, while being on a scouting mission in his native village, witnesses the violence of the fiendish US soldiers toward his family whom he is unable to help. The scene was written with an obvious purpose in mind: to show the “enemies” as blood-thirsty torturers, incapable of any human feeling, and demonstrate the determination of the protagonist to fight the “imperialists”. Yet Óm, again, manages to turn the situation upside down. He declares that Yi’s intention was malicious: he wanted to convince the reader that for the family’s sake it is safer to keep a distance from the guerrilla movement and lay down one’s arms. By depicting the violence of the enemy, Yi intended to terrify the reader and distract him from the revolutionary path: “Yi T’a-e-jun used this scene to suggest to the reader that the family had fallen victim to the guerrilla’s fight, so it was better to keep away from the guerrillas”.758

In another article Óm found other political blunders in this scene in “The Road To My Native Land”.

“In this story Yi T’a-e-jun depicts unrealistic contradictions... The author describes the scene without any emotion – in order to distort the Party’s notion of discipline. The Party’s discipline comes from a deep love of the native land. But this love cannot contradict one’s love for one’s family. Who would sacrifice one’s loved ones for the sake of one’s native land? In real life the duty of the fighter to protect the country from the American intruders cannot contradict one’s love for one’s family! ... The writer’s intention was to stress that the discipline of our warriors comes not from high morale, but is based on fear and violence”.759

The demagogic of these accusations appears especially remarkable if we remember that in 1952 this very Óm Ho-sŏk referred to the pre-Liberation works of Yi T’a-e-jun as “progressive”, along with the works of the KAPF’s writers, and extolled “The First Fight” and “The Road To My Native Land” as “perfect works, created by fervent patriotic feelings”.760 Adulating “The First Fight” as a “perfect patriotic story”

756 Ibid., 468.
757 Ibid., 469-469.
758 Ibid., 469.
759 Óm Ho-sŏk, “Munhak ch’angjake issŏsŏi chŏnhyangsongui munje” [The Problem of Revisionism in Literary Matters], in Munhak-ui chihyang [Literary Tendencies], Pyongyang: Chosŏn chakka tongmaeng ch’ul’p’ansa. 1953, 152-153.
760 Óm Ho-sŏk, Munye kibon, 178, 210, 214-215.
Öm extols the scene as “revolutionary justice” – the very scene he berates just one year later as “reactionary”. He lavishes Yi T’ae-jun’s guerilla characters with the following dubious yet supposed positive “compliment”: “These heroes know neither romantic feelings nor fear of death. When the enemy removes a comrade from their ranks they do not feel any sentimentalism. Instead these positive heroes fill their hearts with revenge, with a striving for future victory. They step over the cold corpses of their dead comrades and move forward to victory!”  

The accusations of Öm Ho-sŏk constituted only part of a large-scale campaign which was unfolding against the writer after the collapse of the South Korean faction in 1952-1953. Virtually all the works of Yi T’ae-jun written after Liberation which had initially been highly praised became the subject of similarly frenzied attacks after 1953. Here are a few other examples:

About “After Liberation” An Ham-gwang, another prominent member of Han Sŏr-ya’s coterie, wrote: “The novel definitely promotes anti-Soviet ideas. It is filled with bourgeois nationalism”. Indeed this was the time when the Soviet Union had to be extolled and eventually, in the late 1950s, An would play an active part in the struggle against Soviet influences.

Regarding “One Hundred Times, One Thousand Times”, An Ham-gwang wrote:

“The author looks at the situation from a physiological point of view. The dead bodies of our patriots and the corpses of the American bastards are depicted similarly … Thus Yi T’ae-jun defiles the sacrifice of our soldiers, propagates the idea of the vanity of fighting, of the devotion of their lives”.

This accusation was developed by another critic Hŏ Kyŏng in a more emotional manner:

“In the work ‘One hundred times, one thousand times’ Yi depicts the dead bodies of the soldiers of our People’s Army and the dead bodies of the enemies, the American bastards, in the same manner. He situates these corpses together. If Yi had any feelings for the modern Korean people he could not observe equally the dead bodies of the soldiers of our People’s Army who were victims in the sacred fight for the freedom and independence of the country and the disgraceful corpses of the American cannibals who were hired by the American monopolists to take part in a war to conquer our nation only to be roundly punished by our people.”

Hŏ Kyŏng, another member of the Han Sol-ya coterie, continued the tirade:

“In ‘The First Fight’ Yi compares the enemy’s cannons which were shooting at our side with the shining moon. If Yi T’ae-jun felt the same hostility towards the enemy as the Korean nation did he would never depict the enemy’s cannons so

761 Ibid., 255-256.
763 Ibid., 29.
764 Hŏ Kyŏng, Munhak yesul punya-esŏŏi kyeogup t’u’jaeng [Class Struggle in Literature and the Arts], Pyongyang: Munhaksŏnjŏnsŏng, 1953, 35.
beautifully – like the shining moon ... All these faults are not accidental. Yi T’ae-jun is stubborn in his bourgeois views. He did not wish to notice the drastic economic and cultural changes in our country. The reason why he turned from the people’s side could be explained by the fact that he did not want to acknowledge the great success of our socialist literature and art, but instead has been obsessed with the rotten West European literature”.

It is significant that the critic focuses on the single rare bright image in Yi T’ae-jun’s prose as inappropriate.

An Ham-gwang wrote about “American Embassy”: “The author in fact supports the vicious propaganda of our enemies about our army. Our enemies falsely claim that the Korean Army is cruel, it does not follow international law and the norms of humanity, and Yi T’ae-jun in his story repeats this same lie”.

This accusation was repeated by Han Sŏr-ya at an “enthusiasts’ conference” in Pyongyang in January 1956. He had obviously forgotten the bloody orgies of violence in his own war-fiction, such as the novel “History”.

These and other accusations, being parts of a wide political campaign, had nothing to do with literary criticism. They demonstrated a surprising readiness to discard even common sense. The critics did not care about proper substantiation of their argument and simply slung all the mud they could at Yi T’ae-jun. It is symptomatic, however, that the attacks were directed often at the brightest episodes or subject lines in Yi’s works. Perspicacious critics did not miss a single spot in which Yi, whilst not retreating a step from his hard-line ideological task, tried to bring some artistic vitality to his work.

From the recollection of Chŏng Ryul, the all too apparent absurdity of these accusations led Yi T’ae-jun initially not to take the situation seriously. For quite a long time he was sure that the dust would eventually settle and the Party would see who was the real writer. Yet it soon became apparent that this was not going to happen. Yi T’ae-jun did not understand that the political situation had changed and as a result of these changes he had lost the political protection which had kept him prominent over the years.

In 1952-1953 all major leaders of the South Korean faction lost their official positions and some of them, including the poet Yi Hwa, faced a show trial. They were accused of being “American spies”, “saboteurs” and Japanese police informers”, pleaded guilty and were promptly shot or disappeared into the growing ranks of North Korean prison camps. The Soviet faction was also steadily losing its influence and could not scare off Han and his cronies any more. The campaign against Yi T’ae-jun reached its climax in January 1956 when the decision of the KWP (Korean Workers Party) Central Committee castigated Yi as a “reactionary writer” for his long-forgotten participation in the "Nine Members Club". Further condemnation was leveled by Han.

765 Ibid., 35.
767 Brian Myers, Han Sŏr-ya and North Korean Literature, 109.
Sŏr-ya at the "Congress of activists of the Pyongyang KWP city committee's literature and art department" after which Yi T'ae-jun was finally purged. Yet for some time Yi T'ae-jun remained in Pyongyang—at least until October 1957, the moment when his Soviet friend Chŏng Ryul left North Korea. Chŏng Ryul recollects that Yi who came to say goodbye to him, looked very depressed. He repeated: "How happy you are to have an escape hatch. What am I supposed to do now?" Chŏng Ryul tried to encourage his friend but realized that he had nothing to offer.

Information about the subsequent life of Yi T'ae-jun is scarce. According to Min Ch'ung-hwan, Yi's exile from Pyongyang occurred later in 1957, and after this Yi worked as an assistant in the Nodong Sinmun office in remote Hambu. In 1958 he was working in a concrete block factory in Hamhung. In 1964 Yi was pardoned and for a while worked as a writer attached to the cultural department of the KWP Central Committee. In 1969 he was said to have resided in Kangwondo province, in the working compound of the Kangdong mine and living on meager social benefits.

Another source, Elena Davydova (Pak Myŏn-sun), maintains that in exile Yi T'ae-jun worked as a ghost writer, i.e. was forced to write novels which were then published in the official press without mentioning his name (largely as part of the so-called ‘creative groups’ which began to proliferate in the late 1960s).

The recently published diary of Yi T'ae-jun's daughter provides us with further information. According to this source, Yi T'ae-jun was exiled to Haeju in Hwanghae province where he worked as a pressman in a factory, then in 1964 was ordered to write prose which was then published incognito. In 1967 he received permission to return to Pyongyang where he lived happily with his family for a while. Then in 1974 he was purged again and exiled to Kangwŏn province. Soon after he moved there his wife died of cerebral thrombosis. The date of the writer's death is unknown. The purge and exile of Yi T'ae-jun seriously damaged the careers and personal lives of his five children.

According to Elena Davydova, the figure of Yi T'ae-jun was initially used as the first "scarecrow" of reactionary writers in the North Korean intellectual world. But the situation gradually changed. Yi T'ae-jun, along with other supposedly "dissenting figures" of the time, was simply erased from the official literary history. For example, Chronology of the history of Korean Literature (Chosŏn munhaksan nyŏndaeipyŏ) published in Pyongyang in 1957 omits the name of the writer even from pre-Liberation literary history. As Elena Davydova claims, the average university student in contemporary North Korea has never even heard the name Yi T'ae-jun.

Such was the tragic fate of probably the most promising North Korean writer. A recognized literary talent before Liberation who, despite his formal adherence to "pure

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768 Yi T'ae-jun munhak yŏngu, 422.
769 Interview with Chŏng Ryul.
770 Yi T'ae-jun munhak yŏngu, 420-422.
771 Interview with Pak Myŏn-sun.
772 Kim Hong-gyun, “Wŏlbuk chakkka Yi T'ae-jun-ŭi t’onggok-ŭi kajŏksa”.
773 Chosŏn munhaksan nyŏntap’yo.
art”, had always kept a keen eye on social and national issues, Yi T’ae-jun after 1945 became a sincere sympathizer of Communism which he perceived, primarily, as a set of lofty moral regulations. The writer consciously chose the DPRK over South Korea and from the very outset vigorously immersed himself in Pyongyang’s literary activity, eager to serve the new state and new system with his pen. Yi’s new works acquired a strong propagandistic flavor, quite in accordance with the imported Soviet maxim that a writer “cannot live in a society and be free from it”.

Despite his professional endeavors and initial bureaucratic success, which was a result of his friendly connections with the once mighty Soviet Korean faction and the South Korean Communists, Yi T’ae-jun failed to survive in the world of literary bureaucracy. Obviously, the reasons for Yi’s tragic fate lay not in the alleged “dissident inclinations” of the writer, nor in his immanent incompatibility with the Communist idea. At least, such alleged inclinations or incompatibility cannot be traced in his post-1945 works which if anything every year were becoming politically more orthodox and aesthetically dull. This is reason to believe that his sorry fate was determined by a lack of political awareness. Yi T’ae-jun underestimated the importance of politicking and concentrated exclusively on his professional duties. He would establish contacts with people for pleasure or out of mutual sympathy, not for any politically useful connections. In this regard he was not much different from Yi Ki-yông, but the latter was careful to avoid unnecessary confrontations with anybody. Yi T’ae-jun was different: he would often express his disdain towards particular individuals simply because of his own personal antipathies or idiosyncrasies and not in order to disassociate himself from unwanted political links or to join the current prominent opposition group. In short, Yi T’ae-jun was no politician, so he was successful only whilst his friends were at the top of the Pyongyang literary world. When the fortunes of his factions turned sour Yi T’ae-jun had no opportunity to improve his personal fate by employing some cunning ruse. He just sank with the losers.

The logical consequence of this campaign was the complete exclusion of Yi T’ae-jun’s works from the North Korean literary discourse. If one can doubt the value of Yi’s post-Liberation writings in this regard, the elimination of Yi T’ae-jun’s pre-Liberation prose from North Korean libraries and bookshops is certainly a matter for regret. Thus the North Korean readership was denied access to one of the brightest pieces of Korean creative writing, to the works which constituted a quintessence of the best Korean literature of the 1920s-1940s

Yet, the campaign against Yi T’ae-jun had another important consequence. It set the real scale of values and priorities for North Korean artists. The fate of this talented and ideologically loyal writer clearly demonstrated to his colleagues that neither professionalism nor eagerness to serve the regime actually guaranteed one’s success or survival. North Korean writers came to realize that, as Brian Myers precisely noted, “their careers would depend less on performance than on access to power”, 774 and we must add, on one’s personal and factional connections.

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774 Brian Myers, *Han Sŏr-ya and North Korean Literature*, 152.
As we shall see in the next chapter, this became a major pattern of action in the North Korean literary world in the early 1950s, and Yi T'ae-jun was just one of the victims.
Chapter 5

NORTH KOREAN CRITICS AS POLITICAL EXECUTIONERS: "LOOKING UPWARD"

In this chapter we will analyse the specifics of North Korean literary critique in 1945-1960 and its role in the formation of North Korean literature.

The study of available materials gives us good reason to presume that in analysing the patterns of activity of North Korean critics, a scholar should reject the prism of rigid theoretical dictums and search, first of all, for the pragmatic interests behind the official statements. Otherwise a scholar can be trapped in endless contradictions and inconsistencies. Such problems can be traced, for example, in the works of South Korean scholar Chang Sa-sŏn who studied the prolific North Korean critic and literary bureaucrat An Ham-gwang. Analyzing An’s post-Liberation activity, Chang emphasizes such trends as An Ham-gwang’s “anti-rightist tendency”, “anti-ultra-leftist tendency”, “absorption of progressive Soviet culture”, “Party spirit” etc. As the specific interests of the critic, the scholar stresses his interest in the “problem of personality”, the “importance of lyricism”, and the “beauty of language”. Considering all this, Chang concludes that An Ham-gwang “made attempts to look at literature from a rational, objective point of view, taking into account all aspects, such as worldview, imagery and form”. 775

At first glance this interpretation appears convincing. “Anti-rightist” or “anti-ultra-leftist” rhetoric was indeed at some periods an important part of An Ham-gwang’s vocabulary. The problem was, however, that this rhetoric had little to do with the actual essence of the literary policy conducted by An Ham-gwang. An could forget about the necessity to promote “Party spirit” when he venerated as a “model work” the story written by his boss Han Sŏr-ya “Brothers and Sisters” (“Nammae”), even if its characters acted in an extraordinarily passive, tearful, and blatantly non-Communist way. At the same time he could rudely harangue “Kayagûm” (“The Kaya Harp”) of Kim Sa-ryang’s, an ally of the rival Soviet Korean faction, for the same passivity of the protagonist and thus his violation of the ever-present “Party spirit” – although Kim Sa-ryang's character certainly conducts himself in a more pro-active way than Han’s “model” protagonist. 776 Neither the “lyricism” nor the “beauty of language” which An may pronounce as an important quality in literature, protected the talented writers Yi T’ae-jun and Yim Hwa from his wild attacks during the defamation campaigns of 1953-1956. On the contrary, An Ham-gwang blamed the writers for these very qualities, treating them as “reactionary”, “bourgeois” and “naturalist”. 777

776 Brian Myers, Han Sŏr-ya and North Korean Literature, 49.
777 An Ham-gwang, “Munhak-ŭi kyeåpsŏng”, 3-41. Take a look, for instance, at the following statement from this work: “The characteristic trait of the reactionary worldview of Yim Hwa is