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The Modern Nation in Colonial Korea: The Literary Construction of the Peasant Class as the Source of National Identity

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The early 20th century was a time of immense transformation for Korea. Politically, the country transitioned out of the dynastic Joseon system and into Japanese colonization, prompting a crisis of identity that deeply affected the nature of Korea’s nationalist movement. In this context, this paper addresses the conception of the modern nation-state as it was developed during the colonial period by analyzing three literary works: “Silver World” by Yi Injik, “Rat Fire” by Yi Ki-yong and The Soil by Yi Kwangsu. Specifically it addresses the establishment of a new social class of peasant farmers and how the writers politically frame them as the pure, natural source of Korean culture and tradition.

The paper is divided in two parts, the first offering a brief overview of the arguments surrounding the reconfiguration of history, class structure and tradition in the academic literature. The second part makes use of these arguments to present a literary analysis of the works.

I. Literature Review

The secondary sources consulted paint a complex picture of the development of the concept of nation in colonial Korea. They range from sweeping overviews to narrowly defined aspects of the nationalist project, but together describe how world events at the turn of the twentieth century prompted a recalculation of the Korean polity into the concept of nation. This new structure was defined by economic class categories and an emphasis on ethnic homogeneity that lent credence to calls for self-determination. Nationalism, as opposed to the China-oriented patriotism of dynastic Korea, developed as a response to the encroachment of the Japanese colonial power and the subsequent influx of the occidental core/periphery and nation-state
The essence of the Korean nation was reimagined to reside in the new economic category of *nongmin* or peasant farmer and a reformulation of authentic Korean “tradition” ensued, creating a repository of Korean national characteristics from which ethnic validity could be derived. The development of these ideas was deemed crucial to establishing a future sovereign state within the Western nation-state system, and writers such as Yi Injik, Yi Ki-yong and Yi Kwangsu actively contributed to the construction of the ethnic Korean nation.

The following discussion provides a brief synthesis of the main arguments surrounding the concept of nation and nationalism in Korea shortly before and during the colonial period. It concentrates on the reposition of Korea’s historical narrative through the work of Shin Ch’aeho, the development of the peasant farmer class as a new social category and the reimagining of “tradition” as a form of political manipulation. Such an overview aims to provide context for part II, which will reference these arguments to aid in a literary analysis of the works chosen.

Sin Ch’aeho completed the first historiography of the Korean ethnic nation in 1908, which, although enthusiastically received, was not fully published until 1937 (Em, 2000, p. 339). Sin used the same tools as Japanese historiographers to assert the ethnic distinctiveness of Koreans and delineate a physical space that constituted the Korean nation. In particular, he developed the idea of *minjok* by tracing a common Korean ethnic ancestry to the mythical ruler Tan’gun and with it creating an ethnically based foundation myth. Sin’s work was especially important for its “decentering of the middle kingdom” or shift away from the China core/periphery paradigm, which coincided with a new racialization of knowledge in the late *Joseon* dynasty and early colonial period (Em, 2000, p. 348). Schmid (2002) places this decentering as a necessary step in rethinking Korea as a nation, since Korean “self-knowledge”

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1 This is a bigger argument throughout Em’s (2000) paper but referenced specifically on p. 344.
was not just subject to the East-West dynamic but also to Korea’s position amongst its Asian neighbors (p. 10). In addition, the “production of knowledge about the nation” necessitated a disentanglement of “native” knowledge from the Chinese-Korean hybrid that had developed throughout centuries (Schmid, 2002, p. 2, p. 11). This “racialization of knowledge” consisted of a conscious categorization of intellectual material based on its perceived ethnic origin (Em, 2000, p. 352). Sources of knowledge rooted in Chinese Confucian ideals were progressively rejected precisely because of their Chinese origin, and a shift toward natively defined sources of knowledge was sought. This emphasis on ethnic individuality and ethnic-based knowledge contributed to a nationalist rhetoric consistent with ideas of self-determination and accepting of the occidental nation-state paradigm. Moreover, it represented a specific notion of the nation that conflated race, ethnicity and nationality into a single concept, overriding other forms of “collective or categorical identities” compatible with the establishment of a national identity (Shin, 2006, p. 7-8).

The reformulation of Korea’s historical trajectory developed in tandem with a new structure of social class categories. Pre-modern Korea constituted of three hierarchical classes—yangban, sangnom and chonnom—defined in relation to their access to government positions, which were in turn largely determined by “mastery of Chinese culture” (Sorensen, 2000, p. 293). As Korea transitioned out of the Joseon dynasty, a new conception of the nation-state came into play that borrowed Western ideas to categorize individuals in terms of economic access (Sorensen, 2000, p. 293). One’s economic position vis-à-vis the means of production became the primary determinant of class, with wealth (and not education) now seen as the principal tool for acquiring position and prestige rather than the other way around. With this categorization method

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2 These terms can be roughly translated as nobility, commoner and slave or untouchable (those employed in the “dark” professions such as butchery, sex work, etc.), respectively. The three classes were distinct and even legally subject to a specific dress code that made one’s social standing immediately apparent (Sorensen, 2000, p. 293).
emerged the *nongmin* or peasant farmer class, a concept that consolidated a number of separate notions, including the separation of agricultural management and labor, the idea that only some members of rural society are “true” *nongmin*, “that relations of production are more important for understanding society than kinship and other kinds of relations, that those engaged in agricultural labor thus constitute… an organic group of people who form a bounded community with internal solidarity, that historical consciousness is a superstructural expression of an underlying economic base,” etc. (Sorensen, 2000, p. 79). Sorensen (2000) particularly argues that although farmers had long composed the largest part of the Korean populace, it was not until the *Tonghak* Rebellion and after that they were reimagined into a distinctive class from which authentic “Koreanness” could be derived (p. 288). As in China and other areas, farmers, which composed the largest proportion of the population but held little influence over the government, came to the fore as the ideological and numerical basis for rebellion. In contrast to these other places, due to Korea’s particular situation as a colonial subject the role of farmers expanded from just a proxy for the masses to encapsulate, as a class, what it meant to be authentically Korean (Sorensen, 2000, p. 307). This reconceptualization thus became an important element in the construction of Korean identity and the direction of the nationalist movement.

Finally, Korean tradition was also reimagined in this period to further buttress the development of the farmer class as the preeminent symbol of national culture and identity. The events of the early twentieth century and the development of nationalism in Korea can be seen as a reaction to Japanese and foreign encroachment, and a reformulation of tradition is in part explained by a “self-protective nationalist reaction” (Kim, 2008, p. 79). However, Kim (2008) argues that cultural movements in any period are a “form of political reaction to a specific social,

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3 The *Tonghak* Rebellion of 1984 is widely regarded as a peasant uprising against the beginning of Japanese penetration. It was based on the *Tonghak* (Eastern Learning) religious movement founded by Ch’oe Suun, which sought to resist the “Western Way” through the “Eastern Way” (Sorensen, 2000, p. 291; Shin, 2006, p. 253 n4).
political and cultural situation” which assures that the “interpretation of culture is… an aspect of political manipulation” (p. 79). Tradition is thus a political product and its “meaning” is specific to a particular group and context. Although Kim does not focus on the formulation of tradition in the colonial period (he focuses on the 60s and 70s), this framework of tradition as political manipulation can be applied to the works discussed in part II, which establish tradition as the property of the new farmer class.

II. **Analysis**

The condensed discussion of consulted secondary sources presented above offers a point of departure for analyzing the works of Yi Injik, Yi Ki-yong and Yi Kwangsu. One work from each author is analyzed within the context of early 20th century Korea. Yi Injik’s novella, “Silver World,” is the earliest of the three pieces, originally published in 1908 and used here in an as-yet unpublished English translation by Sora Kim-Russell. It narrates the struggles of opposing a corrupt government in pre-colonial Korea, encouraging sacrifice for the nation while bewailing the futility of it within the current government structure. Yi Ki-yong, a well-known leftist writer, makes his appearance with his 1933 short story “Rat Fire,” an account of a small village’s experience with gambling, which concentrates on the degeneration of the Korean countryside and ends with the main character reaching awareness as a member of the farmer class and taking action against his oppressors. The third work analyzed is Yi Kwangsu’s influential novel *The Soil*, published in serial format between 1932 and 1933. It follows the life of Sung, a man caught between the excesses of city life and his own desire to work for the benefit of the Korean nation, i.e., the farmers in the countryside. After a series of plot turns, Sung’s devotion to the Korean
cause eventually converts even the unlikeliest of characters, and in the end all the young people travel to the countryside to teach and work for the sake of the nation.

The three works implicitly accept the idea of the ethnic self-determining nation and try to derive Korean identity in particular from the farmers. All three authors contribute to a re-imagination of the class structure along economic boundaries, contributing to the creation of a new category of peasant farmer that becomes the repository for Korean tradition and character. Farmers come to represent authenticity, purity and the natural state of man, and through these characteristics they take on a decidedly positive connotation. The authors romanticize the physical landscape, the act of farm work and the idea of the village, inextricably tying peasants as a group to the geographical and historical space of the Korean nation. In some cases, especially in Yi Kwangsu’s *The Soil* and through the representation of money (a material sometimes imbued with ambivalence, sometimes with negative connotations), they ascribe moral ideals specifically to farmers, further enhancing their function as a foundational social class. Finally, and in tandem with the political views of each author, the peasant farmer class gains political agency. In “Rat Fire” Yi Ki-yong ends by suggesting that the farmer class in the village has been brought into awareness of itself, and in both *The Soil* and “Silver World” farmers are narrated as a potent political force. In this way the three authors studied not only contribute semantic significance to the idea of nation in Korea but also offer a mechanism through which the modern political nation-state can be achieved. The following discussion departs from a more detailed assessment of these claims and primarily seeks to draw out the similarities between the works, though at times it brings out specific differences to reference the effect of political ideology in the development of national identity and purpose.
As discussed in Part I, one of the fundamental changes necessary for a new conception of nation was a shift towards an economically determined class structure. Rather than basing one’s position in society on one’s ancestral lineage or level of Confucian education, economic means began to take precedence as status markers. All three stories deal heavily with the problem of money and its progressively stronger role in social life, especially from a moral point of view. In “Silver World,” the entire plot line and the individual fates of each character are driven by money, a trend perhaps predictable for a story with such a title. Choi muses, “money was king” (p. 46), and indeed it is an equalizing force affecting all members of society. The same is true for “Rat Fire,” where the deterioration of the village is symptomized by widespread gambling, and The Soil, where the allure of money, greed and pleasure are seen as the main obstacles for the betterment of the nation. All three authors present the pure pursuit of money as a negative moral quality by forming associations between wealth and “villainous” characters such as the governor in “Silver World,” greedy Gap-jin in The Soil or the adulterous official Won-jun in “Rat Fire.” However, they concede that money itself is an ambivalent product, and it is rather the means through which it is acquired and spent that determine an individual’s moral value. It is enough to draw a comparison between Choi, a farmer who acquires wealth through “hard work” and rises to a privileged social position, and any of the villain characters that have all simply inherited or extorted others for their wealth to see that money is merely criticized as an incentive for immorality but is itself neither negatively nor positively framed (Yi Injik, p. 2).

While the stories criticize the power of money, they nonetheless accept it as a valid marker of class. In “Rat Fire” the main character, Tolsoe, asks, “What it comes down to is that money is the best thing in this world and it doesn’t matter how you make it, it’s having it that is the most important thing, isn’t it?” (p. 171). Although probably ironic, this quote elucidates a
real relationship where money stands in as a proxy for power. The farmers are oppressed and the only avenue for advancement that they see is to acquire money. This thought is validated by the different positions of the characters in the story, especially that of Won-jun, who comes from a similar farmer background as the rest of the villagers but through some wealth manages to acquire a higher social position as a government official. As the story closes, Tolsoe himself argues that gambling is not an evil intrinsic to the villagers but a reaction to the circumstances they have been placed in. Upon being confronted by the government officials for gambling and adultery in a town hall meeting, he challenges them on the point that they are guilty of the same offences and that, due to the increasingly exploitative strategies of landowners against tenant farmers, the villagers had no choice but to find illicit forms of income. This is the first time that someone in the story formulates gambling as a systematic reaction to the capital structure, and as he inches towards this argument Tolsoe reaches awareness as a member of the farmer class. It is telling that he does so by essentially categorizing himself and his fellow farmers as those seeking but being denied wealth. The story accepts one’s relationship to money, especially in connection to the activity (farming) through which money is acquired, as the new determinant of class over education or lineage.

Money as a proxy for the economic basis for the new class structure is further evidenced by the characters of Choi in “Silver World” and Sung in The Soil. Choi, the central figure of Yi Injik’s “Silver World,” is a clear literary example of the transformative power of money. He is originally a farmer, but through hard work accumulates considerable wealth and consequently prestige in his village. Throughout the story he plays the role of a member of the nobility regardless of his initial social position, showing that an improvement in his level of economic access changed his status in a way that would be rarer in the education and lineage based system
of the past. *The Soil* mirrors this phenomenon in that Sung, the main character, is able to rise through the ranks of society by accumulating wealth. His ascent is not completely monetary, however, since it is known that Sung’s ancestors belonged to the lower nobility and that his level of education also has an impact on how he is viewed by society. However, Yi purposefully intertwines the old system with the new, thereby capturing the image of a society in transition. He mixes old and new ideas to show that former class structures are no longer valid and that new distinctions based on economic access prevail. In page 185, Yi references the former three-class structure of Korea, but ends Sung’s dialogue by calling his wife Jeong-seon to “[help] farmers as a representative of the nobility” (p. 186). In addressing the present time, Sung does not refer to the commoners as *sangnom*, who represent various occupations, but specifically as farmers, and moreover as the group which is most economically disadvantaged. In referencing the nobility, he identifies himself as coming from low nobility and his wife from high nobility, but does so in jest, suggesting that those former class distinctions no longer matter. Similarly to “Rat Fire,” the ability to acquire money becomes the primary characteristic of a particular social group.

Once the economic basis for class structure is settled, it is necessary to redraw the social landscape along those lines. From this process the category of peasant farmer begins to emerge as a distinct and encompassing group in the late 19th and early 20th century. In these stories, it is no longer possible to be a non-landowner villager without also being a farmer, even if the characters at no point engage in the actual act of farming. This is most interestingly portrayed in “Silver World,” where, unlike in the other two works, farmers and commoners are not represented in a leading role. Rather, they stand in the background and are referred to as simply the “people.” Their collective voice is heard through chanting and song, notable because the structure of the songs strongly alludes to the reality of farming culture, where these rhythms
serve a functional purpose. Thus all the people not in the upper social classes—that is, government officials and wealthy landowners in each village—are by default farmers, and poor ones at that. The same is true for “Rat Fire,” although there it is done in a much more explicit manner. None of the characters in “Rat Fire” actually engage in any farming; they gamble and find other means to support their families because farming has become such an unprofitable occupation. This does not, however, stop them from coming into awareness as members of that class. They are narrated not as merchants or villagers or idle citizens, but as individuals who should have been farmers but because of the injustice of the means of production have been forced out of their natural state. *The Soil* in general refuses to present any image of the countryside that is not dominated by act of farming, and the group divide is in many ways treated as a rural-urban split. Similar to the other two stories, however, terms such as “the people,” “commoner” and so on become synonyms for “peasant farmer” throughout the work, excepting specific references to *sangnom* such as that discussed earlier. Thus the category of peasant farmer comes about as an expression of economic means and as a proxy for the rural poor, capturing both the specific aspects of farming as an occupation and the more general characteristics of the non-elite population.

In order to be a functional element of national identity within the nation-state paradigm, it is not sufficient for social categories to simply exist—they must also be imbued with specific political meaning. This forms the next link in establishing peasants as the natural reservoirs of national culture, and the works do this by romanticizing the physical landscape, the work of farming and the role of tradition. The village is framed as an idyllic space, even as the suffering and trials of village people are put on display. The beauty of nature is exalted—the power of Kalmo Peak in “Silver World” or the vast expanse of fields as Sung races by train down the
countryside, the “crescent moon… shaped like a sickle” (p. 153) of “Rat Fire” or the pagoda tree of Salyeoul Village in *The Soil*. Landscape is not just beautiful; it is an integral part of collective memory. Yi Injik writes, “A mountain has no feelings, so what drove Oksun to such feelings of attachment to that mountain?” (p. 61), expressing and exploiting through her nostalgia the deep emotional connections between the natural space and its inhabitants. To take it a step further, in all three narratives the farmers are placed in a privileged position vis-à-vis the natural landscape, where it is their lived experiences that intertwine most intimately with that of the land. This is not just in the obvious act of farming, where human labor begets organic life, but also in the ordinary aspects of village activity. This is most clearly illustrated by the pagoda tree in *The Soil*, which is said to have lived “at least four or five hundred years” (p. 121) of Salyeoul Village history. “The tree has gone through the same joyous and sad times as the village” (p. 121) and as such goes on to belong to all villagers collectively, forming the epicenter for their rituals. It is the consciousness of the village, a witness to the pursuit of “a perfect harmony of ‘I’ and ‘we’” (p. 121).

In much the same way that the physical landscape is glorified and tied to the peasant class, so is the specific work of farming almost sanctified throughout the narratives. “Shuffling backwards step by step as they went, they sang with joy, oblivious to pain or hardship” (Yi Injik, p. 26) because through farming one can reach the highest level of peace. Oksun in “Silver World” laments, “If this were a peaceful, joyous world, where the ordinary folk can plow fields and dig wells and know nothing of wealth and power, no one would have to die before their time, like my father” (p. 79). Farming is the ultimate good standing in direct opposition to the evils of greed and money, and as Sung of *The Soil* puts it, “Among human works, farming seemed the only right, holy and true one” (p. 45).
Finally, the stories contribute to a recreation of tradition defined along the specific lived experience of the farmers, most notably in the description of the so-called rat fires in Yi Ki-yong’s work. Tradition and the erosion of it is presented through this particular custom, which involves the annual burning of the fields to drive out rats and renew the land for a fresh harvest. Even as the narrator describes how these rituals can sometimes become violent, it is still treated in a nostalgic way, as if they represent the genuine experience of being Korean in the countryside. It is important to note that tradition is explicitly structured around farming culture, giving the farmer class more authenticity as “owners” of Korean culture.

All of these elements serve to imbed cultural meaning into the peasant farmer class, creating through them a stock of attributes that can then be used to derive a unique Korean identity. According to each author’s political inclinations, the image is pushed further through an active ascription of moral values. Yi Kwangsu is most aggressive in embedding moral codes into his conception of the nation. This is perhaps due to his personal religious affiliations, as Yi was raised with strong ties to the Tonghak religious movement, retained connections to its continuation under Cheondogyo after political censure and at various points in his life retreated into monasteries to study and seek religious Enlightenment (Lee, 1984, p. 16, p. 17, p. 22). He describes “humility, dignity, broadmindedness, self respect and gravity” as the traditional Korean virtues and in his descriptions attributes those values most strongly to the peasants. Indeed, the plot of The Soil plays out as the moral struggle between sacrificing oneself for the nation or succumbing to the vices of city life, a problem that peasants are immune to. By virtue of living in the countryside and lacking economic means, they are automatically removed from the moral dilemmas Yi finds most pressing. Yi Injik also infuses a sense of morality in his work, but rather

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4 Cheondogyo, or the “Religion of the Heavenly Way,” was the successor of the Tonghak movement but functioned as a strictly religious institute after it was banned for political activities in 1904 (Lee, 1984, p. 17).
5 For more information on Yi’s early life and religious inclinations see Lee (1984), chapters 1 and 5.
than treating it as inherent to the Korean people, he frames it as a necessary tool in reaching the goals of the nation. Speaking of Oksun and Oknam as they dedicate themselves to their studies, he writes, “Their bodies were infused with morality and their hearts with love for their fellow man” (p. 73). He does not necessarily expand the meaning of peasant to encompass also one who is morally good, but he does place them as the most apt recipients of morally sound acts. In their emotional outpouring for the fates of Choi and his family, these same peasants are also construed as performers of moral good. On the other hand, Yi Ki-yong relies more on leftist ideology rather than strict morality to derive the peasant’s righteousness. His characters gamble and cheat on their spouses, but in the end these faults are exonerated as symptoms of a system designed to oppress the lower classes. It makes sense for him to abstain from religiously determined moral values, since these are also seen as tools of oppression in leftist rhetoric, and the fact that he can do so and still frame the peasant class as the locus of Korean identity attests to the strength of the farmers as a cultural symbol in the conception of the Korean nation.

Through this web of meanings, the category of peasant is brought to signify authenticity, purity and the natural state of man. As such it becomes the foundation for the concept of nation, a point articulated in *The Soil* as Yi writes “Koreans are all just country people, commoners in the world’s eyes… we have one thing in common—we are all ‘Koreans’” (p. 25) and in “Silver World” where Choi calls out to the corrupt governor, “The people of Kangwon are not your people, they are the people of the nation” (p. 39). As the people of the nation, they are the natural heirs of a state that serves their purposes, and all three readings call for political action either directly or on their behalf. Sung is accused of inciting rebellion by educating the peasants (Kwangsu Yi, 2013, p. 463), and so is the act of rebellion suggested in the end of “Silver World.” Most telling, Yi Injik opens his story with a pseudo-uprising, as the peasants of Choi’s
village band together and nearly kill the government thugs sent to extort Choi. Similarly, “Rat Fire” ends as Tolsoe argues and calls out to his fellow farmers to denounce the hypocrisy of the company assembled to punish them, and by doing so they manage to drive out the officials. The peasants are not just an economic and cultural class in these stories; they are a political group capable of influencing the direction of Korean history.

These works provide insight into the concept of the Korean nation as it was developing at the turn of the 20th century and during the colonial period. This discussion has focused primarily on the creation of the peasant class as a meaningful category, arguing that in the literary context of these pieces it is framed as the ultimate incarnation of Korean identity. Peasants are placed in a privileged position relative to the romanticized natural landscape, their work is glorified, and in at least one of the stories they serve as the representation of complete moral good. Through an active construction of tradition and collective consciousness, the peasants become a powerful symbol for the legitimacy of Korean nationality. Furthermore, by placing them as politically charged subjects, the authors provide through them a mechanism and hope for the eventual establishment of a modern Korean nation.
References


