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On the Formation of the Public Condemnation of Epoch-making Korean Poet Sŏ Chŏngju – With a Focus on Pro-Japanese Collaboration

Abstract

Sŏ Chŏngju is no doubt one of the most significant poets of 20th century Korean literature. However, his figure is shrouded in controversies originating from his political choices in life. The first of these controversies is his being a ‘pro-Japanese collaborator’ during the Japanese colonial period. The purpose of this study is to move beyond the accusation of Sŏ Chŏngju being an collaborator to map the settings of the colonial background in which he lived and wrote, while also comparing his situation with that of the famous writer, I Kwangsu. Another goal of the study is to examine the approach to his figure and works in recent times. This is for the sake of gaining a deeper understanding of the important poet, who very often is cast away by the superficial criticism of his being a ‘collaborator’.

Keywords: Sŏ Chŏngju, Korean poetry, Korea under Japanese rule, pro-Japanese collaboration, *ch'inilp'a*, I Kwangsu

Sŏ Chŏngju 서정주 徐廷柱 (1915–2000) is no doubt one of the most significant poets of 20th century Korean literature. However, his figure is shrouded in controversies originating from his political choices in life. The first of these controversies is his being a *ch'inilp'a* 친일파 親日派¹, a pro-Japanese collaborator during the Japanese colonial period (1910–1945).

Although more than 70 years have passed since Korea was liberated from Japanese colonial rule, cooperation with the Japanese during the colonial period is still a topical issue. Following Kim P'ongu, ‘No matter what problem arises in Korean society, it is never unrelated to the question of collaboration’.² The reason

¹ Literally means ‘a group or faction intimate with Japan’. Kwŏn 2015: 20.

² Quoted in De Ceuster 2002: 207.

for this may be that pro-Japanese collaboration in the past, a painful and shameful issue for the Korean people, has not been officially processed to this day.³

After the liberation in 1945, ‘collaborative’ literary works were banned and excluded from the literary canon. Instead of processing colonial events, it was typical to ignore the problem for decades to come.⁴ Thus, the processing and documentation of the colonial past did not take place, resulting in unresolved misunderstandings and incomplete knowledge of the past. The main victims of this tendency are numerous important authors and literary works.

The study moves beyond the accusation of Sō Chōngju being a *ch'inilp'a* to map the settings of the colonial background in which he lived and wrote, while also comparing his situation with that of the famous writer I Kwangsu 이광수 李光洙 (1892–1950). Furthermore, the study examines what people think of Sō Chōngju and his works in recent times. The present paper aims to provide a deeper understanding of an important poet, one who very often is cast away by superficial criticism by those lacking deep knowledge about the colonial period during which he was a collaborator. The purpose of the present study is to provide a background analysis of colonial Korea and to examine the two writers from others’ perspectives using available sources on the period. This analysis lays the foundation for future examinations of the works of Sō Chōngju and his contemporaries both during the Japanese occupation and after liberation, as well as the analysis of periodicals and newspaper articles.

The colonial period and Korean literature

Western influence reached Korea in the late 19th century, and it brought about a profound social and political transformation. On the one hand, the strictly Confucian Chosŏn dynasty (1392–1897) was in power, but alongside it, pro-modernisation movements tried to introduce modern institutions and a modern social structure. The incompatibility of these two perspectives resulted in a difficult and confusing transition period, and early modernisation efforts saw strong resistance in some strata of Korean society that adhered to traditional values. An even bigger problem, however, was the external influences that threatened the country’s autonomy, which ended in 1910 with the Japanese annexation.

The first literary translations into Korean appeared in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, consisting largely of works from English, Russian, French, German, and Italian literature, many of which were based on Japanese translations

³ Treat 2012: 81.

⁴ Kwŏn 2015: 196.

of the original works.⁵ Korean writers and poets began to acquaint themselves with foreign works and literary styles and sought to apply them in their works. In society, Western ideas became dominant, and in literature, Western styles and genres became equally as influential.

Due to the Japanese annexation in 1910, the path of development of Korean literature faced obstacles until the liberation in 1945. Japanese colonial rule also affected the Korean way of life and thinking, and Korean authors had to face the disintegration of the traditional world.⁶ At the same time, however, Japan was the link between the colony and the West (i.e., Japan represented modernisation). Innovations came through Japan, and Western ideas all came to Korea through a Japanese filter. Young Koreans travelled to Japan to study, where they became acquainted with modern sciences under Japanese professors at universities.

Korean students studying in Tokyo were also influenced by European literature and the new Japanese literature; in 1919 the journal *Ch'angjo* 창조 創造 (*Creation*) was published to promote national awareness and the development of Korean new literature.⁷

On 1 March 1919, in the form of peaceful mass demonstrations, a wave of protests against the Japanese swept across the country, which was the biggest uprising during the 35 years of colonial rule. The protests were mainly organised by leaders from the two biggest religions of the country at that time: Christianity and Ch'öndogyo 천도교 天道教.⁸ The Korean Declaration of Independence was written by poet Ch'oe Namsön 최남선 崔南善 (1890–1957), who is said to have been the author of the first modern poem. Notwithstanding his important role in the independence movement, he is also one of the famous pro-Japanese collaborators of the Korean literary scene; he became involved with the Japanese in the early 1940s and as a consequence was put into prison after the liberation.⁹ It seems relevant to mention another important poet of the time, Han Yongun 한용운 韓龍雲 (1879–1944), who was one of the 33 to sign the Declaration of Independence and who remained anti-Japanese throughout his life. He heavily condemned both Ch'oe Namsön and I Kwangsu after their conversions to pro-Japanism.

The March 1st Movement was violently suppressed by the colonial government; however, it came as a shock to the Japanese and drew attention to the need for change in the government's policies towards the colonial state.

⁵ Hyun 2004: 21.

⁶ Kim 1970: 12.

⁷ Lee 1965: 103.

⁸ Ch'öndogyo is a Korean religion originating from the early 19th century. The name means 'religion of the Heavenly Way'. It incorporates elements of other Korean religions and philosophies, like Shamanism, Buddhism, and Daoism.

⁹ Osváth 2016: 171.

Subsequently, from 1919 started the era of cultural policy. The new colonial administration seemingly reduced the repression and offered more freedom in many areas. During this period the heavy ban on press, newspaper publishing, and the formation of organisations was lifted, which enabled progress in Korean literature and media.¹⁰

After the March 1st Movement and during the era of cultural policy, a change of attitude can be noticed among Korean intellectuals; many began looking for a cultural path to nationalist goals, such as ‘national strengthening’, rather than demanding liberation.¹¹

In literature, the 1920s were a brief period of free experimentation; writers and poets familiarised themselves with important Western and Japanese literary works and started experimenting with new literary trends. Leaving their own literary traditions, unable to create new forms and rules, writers and poets often tried to find rules to govern their otherwise turbid writing experiences in old European styles. Literature was permeated by a sense of decline caused by the loss of hope following the failure of the Korean independence movement.¹² Nayŏng Aimee Kwŏn explains the Korean experience of modernity in her book, *Intimate Empire*:

The pained writings of Im Hwa and other colonized authors reveal that the condition of dislocation that is arguably universal to modernity was further exacerbated in the non-West by the urgent sense that modernity signified a series of standards that had to be imported from elsewhere. The brutal and ironic consequence of chasing after these imported standards was a perception in the colony that the past – and even the self – had to be discarded. In the case of Korea, this well-understood colonial predicament was hopelessly complicated by its incorporation into the Japanese empire. On the one hand, Korea shared status with its Japanese colonizers vis-à-vis Western imperialism, but on the other it had to endure the predicament of being doubly subjected, by both Japanese and Western imperialisms. Whether they are opposing or agreeing, what all these various voices have in common is their articulation of a sense of lack and belatedness that is (self-) imposed on the basis of histories of development conceived elsewhere. And all these writers tried to overcome this diagnosis of the inferior state of Korean literature and culture, either by pointing to the dynamic history of Korean culture to show that there was no lack, or by urging on a transformation of the present situation in order to meet the standards set by the West and followed efficiently by Japan.¹³

¹⁰ Shin 2018: 115.

¹¹ Brother Anthony of Taizé 2005: 5.

¹² Lee 1965: 103.

¹³ Kwŏn 2015: 40.

In addition, the so-called proletarian literature intensified in the late 1920s, which produced works on political subjects, but the publication of anti-Japanese writings generally entailed imprisonment. In 1925, the Korea Artista Proleta Federation (KAPF) was formed by proletarian writers, and it became one of the leading literary movements of its time, until it was finally dissolved by the government in 1935.¹⁴

In the 1930s, especially as a result of the incident in Manchuria in 1931, a darker phase of colonial rule took place, characterised by the strict assimilation and mobilisation of the colony to facilitate the expansion of the Japanese Empire. During this period, the use of the Korean language was gradually banned, and the emphasis was instead on the dissemination and teaching of the Japanese language. Meanwhile, a generation of Korean intellectuals grew up who were born in the colonial period, studied in Japanese schools, were familiar with the Japanese language, and also pursued higher education in Japan. This generation learnt about Western literature in the Japanese language, and they learnt about literary language and expressions in Japanese. For them Japan was the mediator of the West and modernity.¹⁵ Over the years, more and more of them started writing in Japanese, penned works praising the colonial rule, or collaborated with Japan in other forms. However, this could be taken as their will to create, to publish, and to share opinions, for which, due to strict colonial laws, there was no other framework at that time but ‘pro-Japanese collaboration’.

In 1937, Japan occupied China, culminating in a war situation that by 1940 was affecting all areas of colonial life. Men were mobilised as soldiers and women mainly as factory workers. Literary figures were used to spread and popularise war propaganda. Japanese propaganda actively mobilised works of art and literature and their creators in light of the changing political trends in the empire. During this period, the desire for modern Korean literature coincided with the increasingly strict censorship of the Korean language and the growing war demands of the empire.

In the last few years before the liberation, Japanese censorship intensified, and with the repression of the use of Korean language, the space for Korean-language creation gradually disappeared. Major journals were banned and Korean-language literary life ceased for the time being.¹⁶

After the liberation, the new Korean government claimed that for most Koreans their employment by the Japanese authorities was not out of ideological conviction but for the sake of livelihood. Thus, exploring the issue of Japanese collaboration became the task of historians, who, however, at that time were

¹⁴ Shin 2018: 181.

¹⁵ Kwŏn 2015: 27.

¹⁶ Kwŏn 2015: 17–18.

not able to begin researching this highly sensitive topic due to the unfavourable political situation in the decades after liberation. Especially after the Korean War (1950–1953), for the purpose of national reconstruction, the topic of collaboration became a taboo, and Korean history could only be dealt with within the framework of a narrative devised and disseminated by the state, the basic idea of which was national cohesion and unity.¹⁷

Modernization and Assimilation

In order to gain a deep understanding of the colonial period, it is important to examine the everyday life of Koreans living in that period and the influences that may have affected their thoughts and decisions. It is fair to say that this period is perceived and evaluated completely differently by today's historians and writers, who have not personally experienced colonial life, than it was by the colonial Koreans, who had lived in it. It is not uncommon for later discussions on the topic to attach the title *ch'inilp'a* to every Korean who did not actively rebel against colonial rule but instead lived their life abiding by the rules of the colonial government and taking advantage of the new opportunities presented by the period.

As already mentioned, for many Koreans, especially the intellectuals, Japan represented modernity, development, and the gateway to the West, a perception that played a significant role in their attitude towards the colonial situation. Nor should it be forgotten that long before the annexation, since the early Meiji era (1868–1912), Japan had played an important role in spreading modernity and Western influences to Korea in the field of art. Many Korean artists travelled to Japan to study and learn about new trends. Therefore, Japanese–Korean collaboration between intellectuals can be traced back to the pre-colonial period.

Modernity thus reached Korea through Japan in several ways. However, colonial measures were also present in all areas of daily life: students learned about modern Western sciences in Japanese language; the radio, a novelty of modern times, broadcasted programs to promote Japanese language and culture; and Japanese developments provided many new opportunities for every caste and gender to finally break out of the strict and outdated caste system and female–male roles upheld by the Chosŏn dynasty. Through these steps, the

¹⁷ De Ceuster 2001: 214.

colonial power spent years on trying to shape the colony into its own image¹⁸ and to strengthen the idea of a common past.¹⁹

Furthermore, through its expansion into Manchuria and China, the Japanese Empire seemed strong and unstoppable, a true Asian superpower. Although Koreans' hopes for sovereignty were crushed in the 1920s, many believed that by Korea being part of such a strong empire, after the Japanese victory, its support during the war might lead to better colonial life.

As mentioned previously, colonial measures became increasingly strict in the 1930s, resulting in imprisonment for writers and poets who tried to publish writings criticising the colonial rule. If the writers summoned to trial promised to 'convert', they received a lighter sentence, but it is difficult to discern to what degree this promised conversion took place.²⁰ Furthermore, under increasing pressure, even formerly anti-Japanese, left-wing writers began to speak out in support of Japanese warfare.²¹

It is also interesting to note that the Korean mindset was largely shaped by Confucianism in the centuries before the Japanese occupation, which created a strong sense of duty and responsibility towards the supreme power, a sense of duty that never questions or defies its leaders. Because of this, Confucianism may have also contributed significantly to the general acceptance of various colonial restrictions.²²

These points are important to be highlighted, as they provide background knowledge of the colonial situation and perhaps help to understand and digest why and how so many literary figures had become seemingly or honestly 'Japanese collaborators'.

Comparison with I Kwangsu

Before studying Sō Chōngju's life in the light of colonial influences, it is worth examining the famous writer I Kwangsu in terms of Japanese collaboration. I Kwangsu was born in the late 19th century in an independent Korea; therefore he experienced both the pre-colonial times and the colonial rule. He wrote several 'collaborationist' works, for which he was heavily criticised after the

¹⁸ One of the most often used slogans during the Japanese colonization of Korea was *Naisen ittai* 内鮮一体, which means 'Japan and Korea as one body'. However, this did not mean equality for the colony.

¹⁹ The same ancestry theory was also a popular idea of Japan, which they used to justify the colonisation.

²⁰ Kwōn 1998: 324.

²¹ Pak 2009: 865.

²² Kyu 1992: 140–141.

liberation, but in spite of his ‘shameful past’ he is still first and foremost referred to as an important Korean writer who created the modern Korean novel. However, Sō Chōngju seems to be to this day a ‘Japanese-collaborationist traitor’ in the public consciousness rather than an epoch-making figure of modern Korean poetry. What might be the root of this difference in the public sentiment towards these two important literary figures?

In his study,²³ John W. Treat tries to trace back I Kwangsu’s thinking and reasoning that may have led to his collaboration. Treat calls I Kwangsu a ‘pro-Japanese nationalist’, which may seem contradictory at first, but there is good reason for using this expression. I Kwangsu was a committed supporter of the Korean Enlightenment through modernisation, which seemed achievable through cooperation with the Japanese. However, this idea of his became more and more extreme; by resembling the Japanese, over time, becoming completely Japanese was the way towards modernisation in his opinion.

After the defeat of the March 1st Movement, Korean independence seemed utterly unattainable. In 1924, I Kwangsu stated in the newspaper *Tonga Ilbo* 동아일보 東亞日報 that since Japanese colonial rule could not be broken by military means, adaptation and assimilation over time was the inevitable outcome.

Furthermore, I Kwangsu’s so-called autobiography, *My Confession*,²⁴ reveals the writer’s certainty that there was no future for Korea except colonial existence and complete assimilation over time, as Japan was too strong for Korea to have a chance of liberation. However, he thought that if Korea cooperated, maybe after Japanese victory in World War II, the situation of the colony could improve, and Korea would become a truly equal part of Japan. Alternatively, he thought, if Japan loses the war, Korea will be liberated anyway, so there seemed to be no setbacks to the collaboration, only advantages. The words of philosopher Shelly Kagan illustrate the complexity of the situation of I Kwangsu and perhaps of other collaborators as well.

But what, then, should we say, if someone does an act that looks like it will lead to the best results overall – all the best available evidence supports this belief – but in fact it leads to bad results overall? Did they do the right act, or didn’t they?²⁵

I Kwangsu, thinking about the expected outcome, chose the path that promised more results. In other words he concluded that collaboration, regardless of the course of the war, would do more ‘good’ for Korea than would no collaboration.²⁶

²³ Treat 2012: 92.

²⁴ Korean title: *Naii Kobaek* 나의 고백.

²⁵ Kagan 1998: 64.

²⁶ Treat 2021: 95.

I Kwangsu's 'treachery' caused great outrage and frustration among his readers after the liberation. He was a prominent figure in Korean literature and cultural life, appearing in the public consciousness as one of the leading figures of the Korean enlightenment. However, he became an ardent supporter of the Japanese empire and reinforced total assimilation. After the liberation, people expected a public apology from the collaborators and believed that there will be some form of calling them to account for their 'sins'. However, since there was, in fact, collaboration with the Japanese at all levels of society, the new post-liberation leadership was also not without past collaborators, so instead of confronting the topic, for a long time the typical attitude was to ignore the problem.

In his autobiography, which was first published in 1948, I Kwangsu also shared his thoughts on pro-Japanese collaboration.

If we try to distinguish those who collaborated from those who did not during the forty years of colonial rule, and among those who cooperated differentiate those who truly collaborated from those who could not, what would the result be? Paying taxes for the Japanese, registering one's family, obeying the law, hoisting the Japanese flag, reciting the narrative of the Japanese empire's subjects, visiting shinto shrines, paying the contribution of national defense and sending children to government and public schools are all cooperation with Japan. The reason is that those who did not cooperate either died or went to prison. If someone did not cooperate at all during the forty years of colonial rule, they must have lived abroad, so is it possible to continue the country with only those people?²⁷

Not abiding by the colonial rules entails almost certainly prison or death, but abiding by the oppressor's rules is cooperation. The instances that I Kwangsu highlighted are small parts of everyday life for the colonial subject; however, when looking back after the liberation, it is possible to conceive it as a form of collaboration. So the questions arise, who is considered a 'resistant' and who a 'collaborator'? Based on what does one receive one label or the other?

Nevertheless, no matter how much I Kwangsu's pro-Japanese work is condemned, he is still regarded today as a prominent figure in modern Korean literature. Then what about Sō Chōngju, who was undoubtably one of the most prominent poets in 20th century Korean literature, but is still much criticised for his political writings, his pro-Japanese poems written under Japanese colonial rule, and his later poems glorifying the dictatorial leadership under the regime of Pak Chōnghŭi and Chōn Tuhwan?²⁸

²⁷ I 1972: 284.

²⁸ McCann 2004: 8.

The life and poetry of Sŏ Chŏngju with a focus on the colonial era

Sŏ Chŏngju (also known by the pseudonym Midang 미당 未堂) was born on 18 May 1915 in North Chŏlla Province, during the fifth year of the colonial rule.

He graduated from Chul'po Primary School in 1925 and then continued his studies at Chungang High School in 1929, where he was taught in a heavily anti-Japanese atmosphere.²⁹ The young Sŏ Chŏngju was arrested in 1930 in connection with the student uprising in Kwangju, and despite being released due to the suspension of the charge, he was kicked out of school. In 1931, he enrolled in Koch'ang High School, which although being a Japanese-founded school, also operated under Korean direction.³⁰ However, he soon left school and joined a Buddhist monastery under the guidance of Buddhist master Pak Hanyŏng 박한영 朴漢永 (1870–1948).³¹ In 1935, on the recommendation of Pak Hanyŏng, he was admitted to the Central Buddhist University, which was the predecessor of today's Tongguk University, but he left a year later.

In 1936, his poem *The Wall*³² won an award at the Tonga Ilbo Annual Spring Literary Competition. In the same year, together with other poets, he became the editor of the literary magazine *Poets' Village*³³. He married in 1938 and then lived in Manchuria for a time in the early 1940s, which by then was also a Japanese puppet state.³⁴

His early poetry before 1945 was characterised as *l'art pour l'art*, in other words his poetry did not reflect the current political situation. These early works are characterised by intense sensuality and the influence of Western styles, especially the influence of Baudelaire. In this regard, it is important to point out again that for Korea, Japan was at the time the link with the West; foreign styles and works all reached the Koreans through Japan and Japanese translations. This aspect cannot be overlooked in the discussion of allegedly 'Japanese collaborator' Korean literary figures.

Sŏ Chŏngju's first collection of poems, *Hwasajip* 화사집 花蛇集, published in 1941, is an epoch-making collection, a new voice in Korean poetry whose poems are filled with intense vitality uncharacteristic of earlier Korean works.

In the last years of the colonial period, when assimilation policies and mobilisation for war purposes were particularly strict, writers and poets were also mobilised for propaganda purposes. At that time, between 1942 and 1944, Sŏ

²⁹ Kim (*Korea Encyclopedia*) – online.

³⁰ Sŏ (*Korea Encyclopedia*) – online.

³¹ Kim (*Korea Encyclopedia*) – online.

³² Korean title: pyŏkŭk

³³ Korean name: Shiinburak 시인부락 詩人部落

³⁴ Osváth 2016: 199–200.

Chōngju created his pro-Japanese works, including the short story *Postman Ch'oe's Military Longing*³⁵ in 1943 and the poem *The Song of Corporal Matsui*³⁶ in 1944. Both works can be interpreted as support for Japanese warfare and the mobilisation of Koreans.³⁷

In *Postman Ch'oe's Military Longing*, three generations appear: the protagonist Ch'oe (i.e., the titular postman), his elderly mother, and his son, who all relate to the colonial situation in a different way. Ch'oe, in an almost comical way, tries to follow the instructions needed to 'become Japanese', but of course these habits do not come naturally to him. For the son who was born during the colonial period, these things are completely natural, and he corrects his father's clumsy Japanese pronunciation and actions. Moreover, Ch'oe's mother represents the older generation who had experienced the pre-colonial times and have strong resistance to adopting the newly imported Japanese customs. At the end of the narrative, Ch'oe's mother is only willing to participate in a Japanese greeting so as not to embarrass her son in front of others. The narrative is thus more of a description of the confusing situation at the time than a praise of the Japanese Empire.

The poem *The Song of Corporal Matsui* is based on a true story about a young Korean soldier who fought and died in the Japanese army as a kamikaze pilot. After his death, he was promoted by the Japanese government, celebrated as a hero, and set as an example for the Koreans. Several Korean writers and poets wrote praise poems to give him homage, including I Kwangsu and Sō Chōngju.³⁸

After Korea was liberated from Japanese colonial rule, Sō Chōngju with two fellow writers, Pak Mogwōl 박목월 朴木月 (1916–1978) and Kim Tongni 김동리 金東里 (1913–1995), formed the Chosŏn Young Literary Association in 1946. He also received the position of first art director of the Ministry of Education. In 1949, he founded the Association of Korean Writers.³⁹

In 1950, when the Korean War broke out, Sō Chōngju, along with fellow poets, went to the front line to edit newspapers, give poetry readings, and deliver

³⁵ Korean title: *Ch'oe Ch'ebuŭi Kunsok Chimang* 최 체부의 군속 지망.

³⁶ Korean title: *Songjŏng Ojang Songga* 송정 오장 송가.

³⁷ However, an interesting aspect that Pak Yuha highlights in his study of *ch'inil* literature is that these works are significant in the sense that they are perhaps the only sources of the colonial everyday life of Koreans and they highlight the chaos surrounding the identity of colonial Koreans. The protagonist of the *Postman Ch'oe's Military Longing* short story illustrates how Koreans experienced assimilation in everyday life and how different generations perceived the Japanese and the notion of 'becoming Japanese'. <https://apjjf.org/-Park-Yuha/2923/article.html> (last accessed: 2022. 01. 27.)

³⁸ Kang 2019.

³⁹ Kim (*Korea Encyclopedia*) – online.

speeches. As a result of the horrors seen in war, he developed symptoms of schizophrenia and was treated in a sanatorium for a time.⁴⁰

He was appointed as a life member of the Korean Arts in 1954 and served as chairman of the Korean Literary Association from 1977 to 1979.

After the liberation from Japanese colonial rule, he turned to the traditions of old Korean poetry in his works, trying to combine elements of shamanism and Buddhism with Western styles. In his collection of poems *Sillach'o* (신라초 新羅抄 *Silla Notes*), for example, by using the stories of the ancient Korean state of Silla,⁴¹ he tries to discover the power needed to rebuild Korea through the ideas and values of the Silla era.⁴²

He discovered many later significant poets, such as Ko Un 고은 高銀 (1933–) and Pak Chaesam 박재삼 朴在森 (1933–1997). He also wrote several major aesthetic studies in his later years, and his volumes of poetry have been published in many foreign countries. He passed away on 24 December 2000 at the age of 85.

Sō Chōngju was born, raised, and educated during the colonial period. Therefore his mindset developed under Japanese colonial rule and under the influence of colonial policies, such as propaganda and gradual assimilation. He also encountered modernisation through a Japanese filter; he was a pioneering figure in modern Korean poetry who was greatly influenced by Western literature, but which he may have encountered either in a Japanese translation or in a Korean translation of a Japanese translation.

Is his collaboration something that should be regarded differently than that of a Korean labourer working at a colonial Japanese-owned factory? Certainly, Sō was a literary figure; therefore his involvement was much easily seen and remembered. However, the two might be more similar than it seems at first glance, as both are merely individuals trying to stay alive under strict colonial rule.

It is possible that by the time he wrote his 'collaborative' works, ideas similar to those of I Kwangsu had come to him as well. It is also possible that he really supported the Japanese war and the mobilisation of the Koreans for war purposes, because he hoped that if Korea cooperated, after the victory of Japan, perhaps his country would be in a better situation. Alternatively, maybe in the last years of the colonial period, he had to cooperate with propaganda because of

⁴⁰ Kim (*Korea Encyclopedia*) – online.

⁴¹ Silla was one of the three ancient kingdoms of Korea and the one that unified the peninsula in 668 CE under the Unified Silla dynasty. This era is famous as the heyday of Buddhism and Buddhist arts and also as the era of *Hwarang*, who were knights carefully selected and trained from the nobility and who, even to this day, represent virtue and purity.

⁴² Brother Anthony of Taizé 2015: 9.

strict regulations, otherwise he would not have had the opportunity to publish. However, unlike I Kwangsu, who died in 1950,⁴³ Sŏ Chŏngju lived a long life after the liberation. As such, he was alive to be judged, when after a long period of silence it was finally possible to discuss *ch'inil* 친일 literature in Korea.

A comprehensive examination of Sŏ Chŏngju's poetry reveals that he was a prolific poet and that the vast majority of his works, with the exception of some from the last few years of the colonial period, fostered the development of modern Korean literature and typically worked on Korean themes. Is it fair then to judge him on the basis of a few years that make up a very small percentage of his whole oeuvre?

The opinion on Sŏ Chŏngju in the 21st century

Poet I Sŭngha 이승하 talks in detail about the fall of Sŏ Chŏngju in his provocative piece *Lift Sŏ Chŏngju out of his grave and posthumously execute him*.⁴⁴ I Sŭngha was a disciple of Sŏ Chŏngju in his youth and personally saw the fall of his master followed by his gradual disappearance from the canon of Korean literature.

He stresses that although a pro-Japanese writers' association was formed in the last years of the colonial period, which included prominent writers at the time, including I Kwangsu, Kim Ok 김옥, Kim Tonghwan 김동환, and many others, the young and at the time novice poet Sŏ Chŏngju was not part of this association. Nevertheless, from this pro-Japanese literary society, the only traces that remain testify to the Japanese-collaborationist pasts of I Kwangsu and Kim Tonghwan. The works of the others have disappeared, and the poet to become singled out as a collaborator from the colonial period is Sŏ Chŏngju. Although he himself did not try to be in the good graces of the Japanese Empire, like many other collaborative literary figures had, he did leave a significant amount of pro-Japanese work.⁴⁵

The fall of Sŏ Chŏngju and his gradual disappearance from Korean literary circles and canon began in 1985 when newspaper owner and editor I Mun'gu 이문구 published an article on collaborative literary works and works of art, listing, among other things, collaborative writers, poets, and their works. This was the first article to raise the issue of *ch'inil* literature, the avoidance of which was

⁴³ North Korean troops invaded Seoul in 1950 and abducted several intellectuals. I Kwangsu was among them and supposedly died in prison in North Korea not long after.

⁴⁴ Korean title: Sŏ Chŏngjurŭl mudŏmesŏ kkŏnaeŏ pugwanch'amsihara 서정주를 무덤에서 꺼내어 부관참시하라.

⁴⁵ I 2020: 26.

before a hitherto unwritten rule in literary circles. Poems, a short story, and a literature review were also included in the publication. The name of Sō Chōngju appeared not only in the poems section, but also alongside the short story, which had been written by him – the only short story in the volume – despite the fact that in colonial times numerous short stories with strongly pro-Japanese tone were created by many writers. I Sūngha recalls in his writing the devastation that he felt when he went home with this freshly purchased edition of his teacher's *ch'inil* poems and short story. Moreover, not only Sō Chōngju but also many other prestigious names from the literary sphere of the time were included on this 'list of collaborationists'. He was split; on the one hand, Sō Chōngju was his beloved teacher, but on the other hand, he could not deal with the disappointment of knowing that his master had written pro-Japanese works. Also, the complexity of the situation may have been compounded by the fact that I Sūngha personally, no matter his thoughts on the situation, probably could not, or at least did not dare, stand up for his master, who was then harshly criticised for his Japanese-collaborationist activities during the colonial period. In the end, I Sūngha recalls never meeting Sō Chōngju again, despite thinking about visiting him several times, only attending his funeral.

Although I Mun'gu's publication caused the fall of Sō Chōngju, it was the poet Ko Un who played a major role in tarnishing Sō Chōngju's name after his death. Although Ko Un was also once a follower and beloved disciple of Sō Chōngju, after Sō's death Ko made a particularly negative statement about him, calling him a selfish and stubborn man. Ko Un also publicly distanced himself from Sō after his fall, which suggests that Sō may have actually received a great deal of criticism in those years.⁴⁶

However, this distancing was probably triggered not only by Sō's *ch'inil* works, but also by his later unfortunate political decisions,⁴⁷ which together gave much ground for condemnation. Indeed, during Sō Chōngju's long life, from 1915 to 2000, Korea went through several turbulent political periods, which most probably divided the public opinion.

Because of his political decisions, he is widely regarded in Korean public thought as a 'bad man' who 'should not be forgiven'. These negative feelings against him have become so strong that they are still present today; in the last

⁴⁶ Ko Un was also considered the most important contemporary Korean poet, nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature numerous times, until his fall from grace in 2018 when several women accused him of sexual harassment. As a result, his poems are being removed from school textbooks. Ironically, he is in the same position now as Sō Chōngju was after the publication of the article on pro-Japanese literary works.

⁴⁷ His post-liberation works portrayed the dictatorial leadership under the regime of Pak Chōnghŭi and Chōn Tuhwan in a positive light.

10 years, studies and writings on the Internet about him continue to carry this tone.⁴⁸

Furthermore, poet I Sŭngha claims that today's high school and university students often do not know anything about Sŏ Chŏngju. As he is not part of the school's curriculum, they also do not know his works. Moreover, even if his name sounds familiar, the reaction of the students is indignation over his 'Japanese collaborator' past, even though they cannot recall any example of his *ch'inil* works.⁴⁹

It seems, however, that literary circles later started trying to put emphasis on Sŏ Chŏngju's literary importance. Poet Kim Sŏkchun's article about Sŏ Chŏngju *The pharmacon of the name Sŏ Chŏngju*⁵⁰ was published in 2010. The title aptly expresses the duality that surrounds the figure of Sŏ Chŏngju in Korean literature; although it is undeniable that he is an outstanding poet, an epoch-making figure in modern Korean literature, it seems impossible to abstract this from the political decisions he made during his lifetime. In his study, Kim writes that although there is an idealistic approach according to which a poem is a mirror of the soul, and therefore the reader would expect the poet to set an example with his life, after examining many famous Western literary figures, it shows that this is not the case. Writers and poets are also mortal beings who, although they create important works, do not necessarily live a morally acceptable life.⁵¹ Therefore, Kim also encourages the Korean literary world to consider Sŏ Chŏngju's works separately from the poet's life. In other words, even though Sŏ Chŏngju's actions are morally reprehensible, his works should not be blacklisted but rather should be discussed.⁵²

In 2019, Poet Pak Yŏnjun made similar arguments in the renowned *Han'guk Ilbo* 한국일보 in an article titled 'Looking again, it is a classic – The poems

⁴⁸ For example, a 2015 blog post emphasises that while he was an outstanding poet, it is important to remember not only his works but also the traitor poet's political views. The writer of the blog post expresses their satisfaction that the first name that comes to mind about *ch'inil* literature in Korea is now Sŏ Chŏngju and that his works have been gradually disappearing from textbooks since the 1990s. (Po 2015.)

⁴⁹ I 2020: 25–26.

⁵⁰ Korean title: *Sŏ Chŏngjuranŭn irŭmŭi p'arŭmak'on* 서정주라는 이름의 파르마콘.

⁵¹ Although the scientific approach in the West emphasises the importance of separating the text and the author when analysing literary works, by looking through Korean studies on literature it seems like this is not necessarily the generally accepted view in Korea. The figure and feelings of the author tend to appear regularly during analyses. According to Kim's article, for many the work reflects the author's soul, so it should represent the author's feelings and principles. If this really is a generally accepted approach in Korea, that explains why it is so hard to accept the decisions made by the poet in his personal life.

⁵² Kim 2010: 236–238.

are innocent... read them while hating Sŏ Chŏngju'.⁵³ Pak Yŏnjun is thus of the view that, although the poet is worthy of condemnation, his poems are nonetheless outstanding and classics of Korean poetry.⁵⁴

It can be seen, then, that the judgment of literary circles has become more accepting and open over the years, in the sense that although Sŏ Chŏngju is morally condemned, contemporaries try to focus on his literary value instead.

The purpose of the present paper was to provide a historical overview of the situation of literary figures during the colonial period in order to examine the background of accusation of Sŏ Chŏngju being a *ch'inilp'a*, since oftentimes this accusation is applied without a careful evaluation of the period to which it is connected.

In the post-liberation period of Korea, colonialism, and within that, collaboration became taboo subjects for the sake of nation-building. The new Korean leadership put together a beautified, selective narrative of Korean history that radiates strong national unity, and for decades, history could only be discussed within this framework. Thus, the past was never processed and forgiven. The 'official national history' by the new Korean leadership also divided the colonial period into resistance and collaborators, although in reality it is not advisable to simplify an extremely complex situation to such an extent. Thus, a group of 'Japanese collaborators' were singled out from the colonial period as traitors to the nation, but the concept of collaboration was never clarified. As such, many individuals fell into this category regardless of what they actually did or the degree to which they 'collaborated'. Furthermore, this narrative has created a strong contrast between nationalists and collaborators, when in fact, no matter how contradictory they may seem at first, these two concepts cannot be separated so sharply, for which I Kwangsu is a good example. The figure of the collaborator thus became an extremely easy-to-use scapegoat to hate and blame for the loss of independence, which on the one hand forges the people together and on the other hand allows the majority of the population to let go of their own responsibility and possible guilt for what happened.⁵⁵

Sŏ Chŏngju made poor, or at least publicly condemnable, political decisions several times during his long life. The first were the works of 'Japanese collaboration' written in the last years of the colonial period and then, in the years after liberation, the works written in support of various political leaders. As a result, he is seen as a *ch'inilp'a*, a traitor who does not deserve forgiveness. These

⁵³ Korean title: [*Tasi ponda, kojŏn*] *Sinŭn chalmosi ŏpta... Sŏ Chŏngjurŭl miwŏhamyŏnsŏ ikcha* [다시 본다, 고전] 시는 잘못이 없다... 서정주를 미워하면서 읽자.

⁵⁴ Pak 2019.

⁵⁵ De Ceuster 2001: 215–217.

negative conceptions exist to this day, despite the fact that almost 80 years have passed since the liberation of Korea and 21 years since the poet's death.

However, as several studies and entries have been written on this topic in the last few years, even by contemporary poets, it can be seen that the approach towards his figure is still a topic worth discussing. Furthermore, a current tendency is to condemn the author but consider his works to be important and worthy of being included in the Korean literary canon.

In conclusion, Sō Chōngju should not be excluded from Korean literary history by labelling him a 'collaborator'. Instead, the right way to deal with the controversies of his figure would be to remember both his literary importance and his actions worthy of condemnation. After all, both are part of Sō Chōngju, just as they are both part of the history of Korean literature. Instead of ignoring and hiding the shameful, dark parts of history, it is time to process and to forgive in order to move forward and to gain a complete and clear picture of the events and figures that have shaped Korean literature.

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