Korean Short Fiction from the Liberation Period, 1945-1948

by

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ABSTRACT

Over the years scholars of Korean literature have focused their attention on the formation of modern Korean literature in the early part of the Japanese colonial period (1910-1945). Lately much attention has been given to the place contemporary Korean literature takes in Korea literary history. Very little research has been done on the literature of the liberation (Haebang) period (August 15, 1945-August 15, 1948). With the lifting of the ban the South Korean government had placed on the works of literature from the liberation period by authors who went north, contemporary scholars in South Korea have begun the process of examining the literature produced during this largely forgotten period of Korean literary history.

For this study I translated four works of short fiction written during the liberation period. The translated works are: “Fire” (Pul, 1946) by An Hoenam; “Milestones” (Tojong, 1946) by Chi Hayŏn; “Constable Maeng” (Maeng sunsa, 1946) by Ch’ae Mansik; and “Before and After Liberation” (Haebang chŏnhu, 1946) by Yi T’aejun. These translations represent the works of writers who, for various reasons, chose to take on the social issues that were troubling Korea at the time of liberation.

Some contemporary scholars have stated that Korean authors had little to write about during the liberation period. However, I have identified several major themes common to the short fiction of the liberation period and prove in this study that the writers of Korea had much to say during the liberation period. Themes include: the return of Koreans from overseas, whether from exile, forced labor, or conscription, and the loss of home that awaited them; collaboration; “self-criticism”; the hopes of a bright new future contrasted with the realization that nothing was going to change; and land reform and the plight of peasants.
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1.1 Introduction.

This thesis represents several firsts in the field of Korean studies. This is the first work in English devoted specifically to the short fiction of the liberation period (August 15, 1945-August 15, 1948). I have also translated four previously untranslated short stories from the liberation period, and have included the texts of these stories in the thesis. The translated works are: “Fire” (Pul, 1946) by An Hoenam; “Milestones” (Tojong, 1946) by Chi Hayŏn; “Constable Maeng” (Maeng sunsa, 1946) by Ch’ae Mansik; and “Before and After Liberation” (Haebang chŏnhu, 1946) by Yi T’aejun. These translations represent the works of writers who, for various reasons, chose to take on the social issues that were troubling Korea at the time of liberation. I have identified some of the themes common to the short fiction from this period and will take a closer look at the examples of the themes found in these stories. Themes include: the return of Koreans from overseas, whether from exile, forced labor, or conscription, and the loss of home that awaited them; collaboration; “self-criticism”; the hopes of a bright new future contrasted with the realization that nothing was going to change; and land reform and the plight of peasants. I have examined the research that contemporary Korean scholars have written about the liberation period, the four translated works and their authors, and have synthesized these findings along with my own observations into the text of the thesis. I have also included a section giving a brief introduction to the lives and some of the other works of these four writers--a first in English for An Hoenam and Chi Hayŏn.

1.2 Historical Background.

The end of the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth century, called the ‘Enlightenment Period’ in Korea, saw the beginnings of many developments in Korean Literature. Korea was trying to move itself out of the crippling inefficiency that had marked the end of the Chosŏn dynasty and calls were made to reform and modernize Korea. Writers
like Yi Kwangsu (1892-1950) and Yi Injik (1862-1916) tried through their works to bring some of the modernity they had experienced in Japan and elsewhere to Korea.

Through their works, writers of this earliest period in Korean literature—the 1910's—dealt with subjects such as elevating the status of women, study abroad, the lessons to be learned through contact with foreign nations, abolishing Korean superstitions and outdated practices, the spread of Western thought, and freedom of thought. Yi Kwangsu and his fellow writers believed in the enlightening and liberating role of literature and worked to synthesize the spoken and written languages (Suh Doo Soo, 1965). Throughout the thirty-five year colonial period Korean writers faced varying degrees of censorship and were not able to write freely. Works that were openly anti-Japanese were forbidden. However, the Korean writers still had enough freedom to explore and experiment with the literary trends that were finding their way into Korea, often through the mediation of Japan (Cho Tong’il, 1982).

Through the establishment of literary groups, and the debate that accompanied these groups, the Korean literary movement developed even further (Kim Tonguk, 1980).

In the 1920's and the 1930's there arose a debate in Korean literary circles about the nature and course of “national literature”. Ideas from Western sources and from literature introduced to Korea via Japan influenced this debate. On one side were left-leaning writers who had been influenced by proletarian literature from the Soviet Union, also via Japan. These writers, led by the likes of Han Sŏrya (b. 1901), Yi Kiyŏng (b. 1896) and later the radicalized Im Hwa (b. 1908), felt that literature should be employed as a tool in the establishment of the proletariat and as an aid to the class struggle (Yi Uyong, 1991). On the right were writers like Kim Tong’in (1900-1951) and Hyŏn Chin’gŏn (1900-1943) of the “Pure Literature” or “Art for Art’s Sake” school. These writers felt that literature should not be used as a political tool or for social engineering (Kim Tonguk, 1980). There were also writers like Ch’ae Mansik (1902-1950) and Yŏm Sangsŏp (1897-1963) who tried to tread a line somewhere in between, understanding and empathizing with the lowest rungs of Korean society but holding their works to a standard that could still be called art. These writers held that literature could be used to increase social consciousness (Kim Yunsik, 1998).
The leftist writers formed the Korean Proletarian Artists Federation (Chosŏn P’uroret’aria yesul tongmaeng), a group known best by its Esperanto acronym, KAPF (Korea Artista Proletaria Federatio). As Japanese militarism intensified, and with the outbreak of the Pacific war in the late 1930’s, more and more restrictions were placed on writers in Korea. These restrictions ranged from initially harsher censorship to the arrest and jailing of the members of literary groups, and led to the eventual disbanding of KAPF and the abolishment of all literary groups (Kim Tonguk, 1980). With the breakup of both sides, the “national literature” debate died off. In the end, all works written in Korean were banned and writers who wanted to continue working were marshalled into the Japanese war effort. At this difficult time for writers in Korea, to continue writing meant to collaborate with the enemy. Some writers discontinued writing altogether but many writers succumbed to Japanese pressure. With the end of the war, all Korea was thrown into a tumultuous new era.

1.3 The Liberation Period.

The liberation period (Haebang Konggan) in Korea is usually defined in South Korea as lasting from the Japanese surrender on August 15, 1945 until August 15, 1948, when separate regimes were formed north and south of the 38th parallel. This three year-period was marked first by jubilation at the ending of the oppressive Japanese colonial rule. Next came the solemn realization that Korea had been liberated but was not independent. Lastly was the reality of national division.

With liberation, Korea’s writers clamored to restore the literary activity that had been snuffed out in the last years of Japanese rule. Writers who had been active during the colonial period resumed their writing after liberation. Included in this group are Kim Tongni (1913-1995), Yŏm Sangsŏp (1897-1963), Yi Kiyŏng (b. 1896), An Hoenam (b. 1910), and Ch’ae Mansik (1902-1950), to name but a few. But Kwŏn (1987) and Pihl (1977) both write that with liberation Korea’s writers had lost their inspiration for writing. The striving and longing for Korea’s liberation from Japan had been the driving force behind many of the literary movements and works of the colonial period. With this predominant literary topic suddenly
removed from the lives of everyday Koreans, writers had to look to other avenues for subject matter. But these years were a tumultuous and confusing time in Korea, and it was a time when writers were free to write as they pleased. This combination of confusion and freedom is reflected in the works of short fiction produced in the liberation period.

1.4 Short Fiction.

This thesis focuses on several works of short fiction from the liberation period. Yu Jongho (1993) writes that, strange as it may sound, together with poetry, the short story has been regarded as the major literary genre by both serious readers and writers in Korea. An excellent short story will receive critical acclaim while a number of popular novels go unnoticed simply because they are written for 'lowbrows'. A writer devoted exclusively to the short story tends to flatter himself that he is a “genuine and pure” writer free from the corrupting influence of commercialism. Yu finds it ‘remarkable that with the importance of the short story in Korea it has played such a minor role on the literary scene in Europe and America’ (p. 151).

Yu goes on to say that the prestige the short story enjoys in Korea can safely be said to be one obvious defining feature of contemporary Korean literature. He explains that the importance placed on the short story is due almost entirely to the peculiarity of the Korean literary market. Because publishing works even by well-known writers is sometimes a risky financial undertaking, few publishers want to take this risk on new writers. So the promotion of new writers is left to literary magazines or journals. And the short story is preferred in these venues because of limited space (p. 151).

A large number of the works of fiction produced in the liberation period were short stories. In addition to the above mentioned reasons for the popularity of the short story in Korean literature, Yim Chinyōng (1990) lists three other factors that help explain the dominance of the short story in the liberation period. First, in November of 1941, the Japanese authorities had banned the use of the Korean language in the print media in Korea. Writers were forced to write in Japanese if they wanted to continue their literary activities.
Yim asserts that upon liberation, new writers and established writers alike ‘needed practice’ to resume their Korean language writing and that the short story was preferred for this practice.

Secondly, a more fundamental reason had to do with the trend toward realism among writers. Writers were striving to be objective and realistic in their writing but could not completely free themselves from the harsh experiences they had suffered or witnessed during the colonial period; therefore, writers avoided full-length novels. With the sudden ending of the ‘dark age’ of Korean literature, the jubilation of liberation was easily reflected in the short story genre. There was also a desire on the part of writers to absolve themselves personally from the guilt they felt from the almost inescapable collaboration with the Japanese and the pro-Japanese stance that many writers found themselves in at the end of the colonial period. This could be accomplished much more quickly in a short story than in a full length novel.

Third is the historical peculiarity that resulted from the frustrated hopes of the masses hoping for national liberation and an anti-feudalistic democratic revolution. This ‘frustrated liberation’ was well reflected in the short story genre (pp. 235-236).

1.5 The Lifting of the Ban.

Until the ban on authors who went north was lifted in 1988, there was little information readily available on these authors and their works. O Yangho (1989) has called the lifting of the ban the most significant literary event of 1988. O goes on to say that because the ban has been lifted on the works of many poets and writers who were either taken north or went north of their own accord, a new history of Korean literature--one that includes all of Korea’s writers and literature--needs to be written (p. 4). It is true that histories of Korean literature written before 1988 give little attention to writers and works of literature that were produced by these writers and poets who, for whatever reason, left the south after 1948--the year Korea was divided into the two political entities we recognize today. Kim Ponggun, Yi Yongnam and Han Sangmu’s Han’guk hyŏndaes chakka ron
(Discussion of Korea's Contemporary Writers, 1980) gives no mention to Han Sŏrya, Im Hwa, Yi T'aejun, Hŏ Jun (b. 1910) or An Hoenam, to name but a few of the important literary figures from both the Korean liberation period and the Japanese colonial period who had gone north. Kim Yunsik’s Han’guk kündae chakkaron-go (Discussion of Contemporary Korean Writers, 1981) likewise does not mention these authors who went north. There are books written before the ban was lifted that do mention several of these authors and their works and activities, but no detailed studies were published until after 1988 (see Chŏng Hansuk, 1985).

Politically there appears to have been much more activity in Korea among those on the left of the spectrum immediately following liberation. Cumings (1981) documents in detail the organization and activities of peoples committees immediately following liberation and the leftist leanings of many of these committees. According to Cumings most Korean counties had some sort of organized Peoples Committee. These committees were initially set up to keep the peace and return control of the country to the Korean people as the Japanese withdrew after their defeat. A majority of the committees organized were leftist although there were some right-leaning areas in the country. Kim Chong’ún (1982) says the political fervor and debate that took place following liberation was mirrored by those in the Korean literary world. Perhaps this can help explain why left-leaning writers seemed so much more active during the liberation period. Leftist writers immediately seized upon the sudden liberation of Korea to form a new literary organization, the Center for the Construction of Korean Literature (Chosŏn munhak kŏnsŏl ponbu), on August 17, 1945. It was not until a month later that the rightist counter-organization, the Central Culture Association (Chung’ang munhwa hyŏphoe), was formed.

Along with the ban, which included research also, the low level of activity amongst rightists help explain why so few works on the history of Korean literature published before the lifting of the ban give more than a footnote’s mention of the liberation period. Right-wing writers appear as less active during the period and so perhaps scholars focused their attention on the activities of rightists at a later time. More than likely, though, scholars of Korean
literature in Korea recognized the fact that no history of the literature of the period could be complete that excluded the leftists. Korean literary scholarship had no choice but to hold off, waiting for the day when the ban would no longer be in place and the story could be told in its entirety.

1.6 Annotated Bibliography

Since the lifting of the ban in 1988 on writers who had gone to North Korea, numerous books and articles have been published focusing on the literature of the liberation period. Included in these books and articles is information on the authors from the liberation period who produced these works and on the social and political movements that influenced them. This thesis focuses on four writers, namely: An Hoenam (b. 1909), Ch’ae Mansik (1902-1950), Chi Hayŏn (b. 1912) and Yi T’aejun (b. 1904). Early on in the post-ban freedom, several literary scholars chose to include specific works of fiction by these authors in new anthologies of Korean literature that were important, not only for the period of liberation, but for modern Korean literary history as a whole. Both Kwŏn Yŏngmin in his Han’guk-ui hyŏndaesosol 1: 1945-1969 (1989) and Kim Huimin in his Haebang 3 nyŏn ŭi sosol munhak (1997) include short stories by these authors, and specifically the stories translated for this thesis. Namely: “Fire” (Pul, 1946) by An Hoenam; “Milestones” (Tojong, 1946) by Chi Hayŏn; “Constable Maeng” (Maeng sunsa, 1946) by Ch’ae Mansik; and “Before and After Liberation” (Haebang chŏnhu, 1946) by Yi T’aejun. Kwŏn later expanded his Han’guk-ui hyŏndaesosol 1: 1945-1969 (1989) and in 1995 published Han’guk hyŏndaemunhaktaege: Sosol 1935-1945 (1995). In the introduction to this volume, Kwŏn gives the following three reasons for including these works in his anthology. First, they are works that had received much critical attention, or new information about them was being brought to light. Second, they are works whose historical significance has proved to be long-lasting. And third, to introduce works by former KAPF writers and works by writers who fled to the north. It was partly on this basis that I chose to focus my attention on these particular short stories. Another reason for choosing this period and these authors was that
they have not been covered in English before.

Kwŏn Yŏngmin’s *Study of Writers Who Went North* (Wŏlbuk munin yŏn’gu, 1989) gives a brief introduction to the liberation period, detailing the formation of right- and left-wing literary groups. There is also a short discussion of the reasons writers were compelled to go north and at what point during the liberation period certain prominent writers went north, as there appear to be have been different phases in the migration north. Most of the rest of the book is devoted to a closer look at the lives of the sixteen writers Kwŏn chose to include—Han Sŏrya, Yi Kiyorŏng, Kim Namch’ŏn, Yi T’aejun, Im Hwa, Song Yŏng, and An Hoenam to name a few. Kwŏn contributed the chapter introducing the period at the beginning of the book and the chapter on Han Sŏrya. Each of the other fifteen chapters describing writers who went north is written by other contemporary South Korean literary critics or scholars.

Kwŏn also wrote *Studies on the Immediate Post-Liberation National Literature Movement* (Haebang chikhu ŭi minjok munhak undong yŏn’gu, 1989). Here he gives a more lengthy treatment of the formation of the various literary groups after liberation. Also included is a description of each group’s ideology, and of the figures who led the national literature movement. Prominent literary works that had a bearing on and importance in the literature movement are also discussed, including the stories included in this thesis. There is also a chapter devoted to the stories of experience like “Fire” (Pul, 1946) by An Hoenam, and the stories of self-criticism like “Milestones” (Tojong, 1946) by Chi Hayŏn.

Yi Uyong has also done much in the post-ban fervor to improve our understanding of the literary developments of the liberation period. In 1990, the two-volume *Studies on Liberation Period Literature* (Haebang Konggan ŭi munhak yŏn’gu, 1990) edited by Yi was published. In these two volumes we find a total of 27 master’s theses, doctoral dissertations and journal articles by various scholars on various topics of research on the literature of the liberation period.

Yi Uyong’s *Historical Essay on the National Literature of the Liberation Period* (Haebang konggan ŭi minjok munhaksa-ron, 1991) chronicles the development of the right-
and left-wing literary groups after liberation. He also tells of the renewal of Korea's national literature debate which had died down in the closing years of Japanese rule and describes how the most active authors and their stories fit into this debate. He also includes a chapter discussing the characters found in Yi T'aejun's novels and short stories.

In Yi Uyong's *Phases of Korean Novels Immediately Following Liberation* (Haebang chikhu han'guk sosol yangsang, 1993), Yi divides the three-year liberation period into three sub-periods; August 1945-December 1946, he calls the 'foundation phase'; January 1947-December 1947, he calls the 'phase of deepening confrontation', and January 1948-August 1948 he calls the 'phase that determined the division of Korea'. In the first section Yi describes again the formation of literary groups and the renewal of the national literature debate. In describing the three phases, Yi looks at the important developments in right- and left-wing literature and the authors and stories that make up these developments as they pertain to the phase and tracks the development of Korean literature through all three phases.

Kim Yunsik's *Historical Essay on Liberation Period Literature* (Haebang konggan ui munhaksa-ron, 1989) details the development of the various literary groups following liberation and the renewal of the national literature debate. Kim does not limit his focus to developments in Seoul but also describes the literary developments north of the 38th parallel. He devotes a chapter to the intellectual developments that took place during liberation and has written about developments in poetry as well. There is also as a special section on Yi T'aejun.

In his *A Discussion of the Literature Movement Immediately After Liberation* (Haebang chikhu ui munhak undongnon, 1988), Sin Hyönggi details the right-left literature debate that renewed after liberation. He gives some detail about the development of the literature groups and the course each took in the liberation period. He also briefly mentions the centrists who joined neither camp.

Kim Sŭng-hwan’s *Research on the Realist Literature of the Liberation Period* (Haebang konggan ui hyŏnsilchuŭi munhak yŏn’gu, 1995) is a more theoretical study of the literature of the period. He looks at the meaning of realism as it applies to the liberation
period’s literature. Kim also includes a section on the literature debate and the formation of literary groups and then examines the realist novels and short stories of the period.

As far as newer anthologies go, the 100-volume Han’guk sosol munhak tae’gye is useful in making available a wide range of authors not only from the liberation period but from all of modern and contemporary Korean literary history. Along with stories and novels, each volume contains biographical information on authors as well as a brief synopsis of the works contained. Many authors’ works not readily available can be found in this set.

Of all the authors I have examined from the liberation period who went north, Yi T’aejun has been the focus of the most scholarly interest. Along with many of Yi’s short stories, Before and After Liberation (Haebang chŏnhu, 1992), edited by Im Hyŏngt’aek and Min Ch’unghwan, provides information about Yi’s life as well as a brief analysis of some of his works of short fiction.

1.7 The Formation of Literary Organizations and Renewal of the National Literature Debate.

On the seventeenth of August, 1945, two days after liberation, the Committee for the Construction of Korean Literature (Chosŏn munhak kŏnsŏl ponbu) was organized under the leadership of Im Hwa, Kim Namch’ŏn (b. 1911) and Yi Wŏnjo (b. 1909). Two days later, on the eighteenth of August, the separate committees for the construction of music, art, and cinema linked up with the literature committee as the Central Committee for the Construction of Korean Culture (Chosŏn chung’ang munhwa kŏnsŏl ponbu). With this combining of committees, Im Hwa had seized control of all cultural activities in Korea. Nearly all of the artists and cultural figures in the country from the left and right were included in this organization. A look at the rolls of the organization reveals names like the above-mentioned Im Hwa as well as Kim Namch’ŏn, Yi Kiyŏng and Han Sŏrya, who had been active in KAPF in the 1930’s. There were also figures like Kim Kirim (b. 1908), Chŏng Chiyong (b. 1903), Kwang Kyun and O Changhwan (b. 1918), who had been active in the modernism movement. Not to be excluded were poets and those from the pure literature camp like Yi T’aejun and Pak T’aewŏn (b.1909) (Kwŏn, 1986, pp. 9,10).
As mentioned earlier, during the colonial period there arose a debate over the course Korea's literature should take. This debate began in the 1920's and was waged between the left-wing proletarian literature camp promoting the use of literature as a tool for class struggle and the more conservative right-wing pure literature group holding an 'art for art's sake' stance. The debate grew throughout the 1930's but was halted at the end of the decade as the Japanese shut down the activities of all literary groups. Cho Tong'il (1982) has called this period the 'age of criticism and dispute'. It is no wonder that, given the fervor with which this debate was waged, one of the most significant developments in Korea's literary world upon liberation was the renewal of this debate. It has also been pointed out that this debate between the pure literature camp and the proletarian literature camp in the immediate years after liberation paralleled the larger battle that was taking place between the two ideological camps (Kim Chong'un, 1982).

Though Im Hwa and those associated with him had pushed radical bolshevism before the break-up of KAPF in 1934, Yi Uyong (1991) writes of the Committee for the Construction of Korean Literature (Chosŏn munhak kŏnsŏl ponbu) that their initial objective was not the proletarian theme of class struggle but a progressive national literature. Kwŏn (1989) also states that the members of this group were not initially concerned with ideology or a particular literary movement. They were merely pleased and thankful to be able to meet together and map out the future plans for Korean literature—an activity that had been denied them for so long under the Japanese. For a short time rightists and leftists were able to work under the same umbrella planning the future of Korea's literature.

But with Im Hwa in full control of the cultural activities of this organization, the influence of the communist party, founded by Pak Hŏnyŏng, began to be felt (Yi Uyong, 1991). Im Hwa had been the leader of the radicalized younger guard that had returned from Tokyo in 1931 and steered KAPF on an ultra-leftist path. Bit by bit the activities of the Committee for the Construction of Korean Literature (Chosŏn munhak kŏnsŏl ponbu) began to move in the direction of communism (Kwŏn, 1989).

Out of this move toward communism another group was formed by those opposed to
the leftist cause. On September 8, 1945, the Association of Korean Literature (Chosŏn munhwa hyŏphoe) was formed. This group, led by Pak Chonghwa (1901-1981), consisted of writers like Pyŏn Yŏngno (1897-1961), O Sangsun (1894-1963), and Kim Kwangsŏp, who had been opposed to KAPF during the colonial period. Shortly after the Association was formed its name was changed to the Central Cultural Association (Chung’ang munhwa hyŏphoe) and on September 18 other right-wing leaning writers like Sŏ Kangsŏk, Hö Yongho and An Sŏkju (1901-1950) joined. Compared to the now purely leftist Committee for the Construction of Korean Literature, very little activity of any kind took place at the Central Cultural Association. Kwŏn (1989) suggests this was because this conservative group was not involved in the socialist causes championed by the left.

As mentioned, Im Hwa and Kim Namch’ŏn had been active in KAPF during the colonial period. In 1935 the Japanese authorities conducted their second crackdown on KAPF (the first had been in 1931) and after many of the members of KAPF had been arrested or otherwise pressured by the authorities, Kim Namch’ŏn and Im Hwa submitted an official statement of dissolution to the police (Kim Yunsik, 1982). This event was to remain a thorn in the side of many of the former members of KAPF who had opposed the break-up of KAPF. These same former members of KAPF did not agree with the all-inclusive nature of the Committee for the Construction of Korean Literature and the watered down version of proletarian class struggle advocated therein (Kwŏn, 1989). On September 17, 1945, with the support of writers like Han Sŏrya and Han Hyo (b. 1912), the Korean Proletarian Literature League (Chosŏn p’urolletaria munhak tongmaeng) was formed by Yi Kiyŏng and Song Yŏng (b. 1903). Unlike the slight move toward communism of the Committee for the Construction of Korean Literature (Chosŏn munhak kōnsŏl ponbu), the stated objective of the Korean Proletarian Literature League (Chosŏn p’urolletaria munhak tongmaeng) was a more direct move toward communism. Its aim was the construction of proletarian literature and denunciation of the development of fascist, bourgeois, social revisionist and reactionary literature (Kim Yunsik, 1999).

With the Central Cultural Association (Chung’ang munhwa hyŏphoe) representing
the right-wing writers, the two left-wing organizations—the Korean Proletarian Literature League (Chosŏn p’urolletaria munhak tongmaeng) and the Committee for the Construction of Korean Literature (Chosŏn munhak könsōl ponbu)—vied for control of left-wing writers’ activities. Though the rhetoric of these two left-wing groups indicated vast differences, fundamentally they differed only on minor issues (a fact mentioned in Yi T’aejun’s “Before and After Liberation” (Haebang chŏnhu, 1946) and ultimately the two joined forces on Dec. 3, 1945, as the Korean Writers’ League (Chosŏn munhak tongmaeng). As a united left front they were better positioned to strengthen their efforts at influencing and determining the course of Korean literature. But with this union they lost the influential figures Han Sŏrya and Yi Kiyŏng who still could not forgive Im Hwa for the break up of KAPF in the thirties, and went to North Korea.

All of the events described above took place in the south of Korea. Immediately following liberation the soviet army occupied the North. Seoul being the colonial capitol, it was natural for most literary activity to take place there. But at the same time there were some writers living and working in the northern half of the country. Cumings (1981) notes that most of the left-wing activities of the colonial period took place in the southern part of Korea and that the northern part of Korea was seen as a right-wing Christian stronghold. Thus, the first writers’ organization to be formed in the northern part of Korea following liberation was the pure literature camp, the P’yŏngyang Art and Culture Association (P’yŏngyang yesul munhwa hyŏphoe) formed by Ch’oe Myŏng’ik (b. 1903) (Kim Yunsik, 1989).

At the same time, and in direct opposition, the P’yŏngyang Regional Proletarian Art League (P’yŏngyang chigu p’urolletaria yesul tongmaeng) was formed by Kim Ch’angman and was backed and funded by the Soviet authorities. Initially, Ch’oe Myŏng’ik’s group, being perceived as more prestigious by the writers of P’yŏngyang, wielded more influence and was successful in putting off the efforts of the Soviet authorities to consolidate the two groups. But in the end, with no financial support and due to the burgeoning growth of the P’yŏngyang Regional Proletarian Art and Culture League, Ch’oe was forced to disband the
P'yŏngyang Art and Culture Association. With the break up of Ch'oe's group, all the writers and artists in the northern half of Korea were automatically considered members of the Proletarian Art League. In March of 1946 the name was changed to the North Korean Federation of Literature and Art (Puk chosŏn yesul ch'ong-tongmaeng) (Myers, 1994).

Back in the South, now under the administration of the United States Military Government, a systematic persecution of leftists began. In the fall of 1946, riots and social unrest erupted in the south of Korea. Blame for these and other problems was laid on communist insurgence from North Korea and all left-wing organizations were singled out for harsh treatment (Cumings 1981). It was mentioned above that Han Sŏrya and Yi Kiyŏng went to North Korea in December 1945, protesting the coupling of the two leftist literary organizations. These were some of the first writers to make the move to North Korea. Many others would follow. The harsh conditions that leftist writers in the south found themselves in and the prospect of more political freedom in the north generated an exodus of leftist writers to P’yŏngyang between late 1946 and the middle of 1947 (Kwŏn, 1989). Other leftist writers, An Hoenam and Hŏ Chun included, held on in Seoul, but then by August of 1948 when Korea was officially divided into separate regimes, most of them had gone to the north. A few more went north during the course of the Korean war (1950-1952) (Kim Yunsik, 1997). The Korean Writers’ League was left powerless from the loss of so many of its members. Naturally, the Central Cultural Association (Chung’ang munhwa hyŏphoe) took control of the literary scene in South Korea (Kim Yunsik 1998).

With the unprecedented freedom to organize and carry on political and literary activities that came immediately after liberation many of Korea’s writers clamored to one side or the other of the political spectrum. By the end of 1947, just two short years after liberation, the political situation in Korea dictated that most of the left-leaning writers were in the north of Korea and organized under the North Korean Federation of Literature and Art while the right-wing writers remained in the south, organized under the Central Cultural Association.
2.0 Themes in the Short Fiction of the Liberation Period.

2.1 Introduction.

With the end of Japanese colonial rule, there was a groundswell of optimism for Korea’s future. Koreans had their country back. The suppression of literary activity in the closing years of Japanese rule was suddenly lifted and Korea’s writers were let loose to pursue whatever course they chose. This was the only time in modern Korean history when writers were free to write with impunity (Yu Jongho, 1993). But the tyranny of Japanese rule had been the main focus and inspiration of writers leading up to the closing years of Japanese rule or ‘dark age’ of Korea. With the single most major social cause suddenly removed from the lives of the Korean people, what were the writers of Korea to write about (Pihl, 1977)? Kwôn (1987) says of this time that it remains true that Korean literature of the immediate post-liberation period lacked the ‘inner will’ that marked the earlier colonial period literature as it responded to historical conditions engendered by the loss of nationhood and racial identity. Just as the word freedom implies, the release from all restraints did indeed produce a free proliferation of literary thought, but it could not foster focused intellectual leadership. In spite of the fact that the directions to be taken by post-liberation literature were clearly visible, Korean literature, still without a practical method to achieve these goals, was swept up in the ideological conflict between democracy and communism (p. 35).

Regardless of the fact that Korean literature and literary figures were swept up in a greater ideological battle following liberation, there were many lively works produced during the period. A look at some of the short fiction produced during the period reveals several common themes. These include ‘self-criticism’, the return of overseas Koreans and the loss of home, bright future/dashed dreams, the plight of peasants and land reform, the problems of collaboration, and anti-Japanism, to name just a few.

2.2 Self-Criticism.

Life under the colonial system instituted by the Japanese led many Koreans to act
selfishly in their own interests (Han Hyŏnggu, 1990). Out of a sense of self-preservation many Koreans cooperated or even collaborated with the Japanese to varying degrees. With liberation came the realization of what had happened and the need to rid Korea of the vestiges of Japanese colonialism (Kwŏn, 1989). One of the first things to happen on the literary front following liberation was the call among writers for self-criticism (Kim Yunsik, 1989). In fact, two days after liberation on August 17, 1945, the first of two conferences was convened for the express purpose of letting writers come forward and make statements of conscience. Writers were urged to come forth and declare where they stood on issues now that it was safe to organize a venue to do so. Writers were also able to accomplish the same thing in their works. “Milestones” (Tojong, 1948) by Chi Hayŏn (b. 1912), is the story of a leftist who is continually looking inside himself in an attempt to come to terms with his own ideology and actions in the years leading up to liberation. Throughout the story the main character, Sŏkjae, is troubled by his actions and motivation during the colonial period and a strong sense of self-criticism is evident.

“But when his thoughts reached this point, his mood for that day was ruined, too. The fact that he had been released from prison six years ago on account of illness was no excuse. It seemed he had been living all this while quiet and lame even though he was alive. He sensed a certain unknown aversion for himself, but more than this, he felt as if he had lived these long six years as a waste to the human race” (My translation, see section 7.2).

Sŏkjae, the protagonist in the story, seems to be convinced that he is a bad person. He is also convinced of the worthless life he has led since leaving the frontlines of the communist movement to save himself from further imprisonment or peril. The self loathing continues:

“I have lived my life for so long just for myself. When I was in hiding and then in prison it was only for myself. During my twenties I wanted to establish myself as an extraordinarily important person. When my thirties rolled around I wanted to set myself up as an utterly conscientious person with everybody’s trust. But now I’ve dug my own hole and can’t get out” (My translation, see section 7.2).
We learn from the story that Sŏkjae had long been a leftist and had been committed to the communist party. Besides his own lack of commitment to the party over the last six years, the one thing that seems to bother him most is the fact that, even though he feels he falls short of being a good party member, many of his former friends, like Kich’ŏl, who had given up on the cause of the party and had even turned to capitalism during the closing years of Japanese rule, have now reconstituted the party and are in positions of authority. Sŏkjae’s criticism of his own faults is the author’s criticism of those in Korea who had sold out to the Japanese or to their own greed only to flock back now to the movement and stepped up and assumed leadership roles in the communist party (Yi Uyong, 1993).

“Milestones” is a story about self-criticism and group criticism. Self-criticism during the liberation period was seen as a way for writers to come to terms with their pasts. Sŏkjae’s “self-criticism” continues to the very end of the story. As he meets with Kich’ŏl and his other former colleagues he is dubious of them and of himself. Deep inside he is appalled that men such as these could dare to form the “party”. Sŏkjae thinks that they should all be flogged. At the same time he also condemns his own lack of conviction for the communist cause. In his final act of self-criticism he turns down an offer to serve as a leader of the party and merely takes the formal steps to join the party. In recording his class membership on the form, he writes ‘petit bourgeois’ and leaves the party headquarters.

Self-criticism was common in many of the short stories from the liberation period. “Fire” (Pul, 1946) by An Hoenam is the story of the return to Korea of a man conscripted to work overseas in the Japanese Pacific war effort. The story can also be seen as the author’s attempt at confessing some of the sins of his past. The main character in the story, Mr. Lee, has spent four years as a conscript laborer for the Japanese on Truk island in the Pacific. It was a terrible experience for this man made even more poignant by the following revelation:

“The bombardment of Truk Island could not be described in any other way but as a sea of flames. Forty-eight men had gone to Truk from Yŏngi county but a mere seven returned. Of course, some got sick and died and others starved to death and some even went half crazy and hanged themselves. Most, however, were
sacrificed by the Japanese in the air raids and bombardment from the warships. How shocking and frightful to even think of it. The war had been so terrible, and it was possible to judge from its victims how bad it really was. Mr. Lee went on: “This war that the Japanese had started, and their resistance to the bitter end, were my enemies. They were Korea’s enemies. They were the enemies of the whole western world. They were the enemies of all mankind. They were even the enemies of the Japanese people themselves.” He spoke in a strange, aroused tone when describing the victims of the war and when talking about the ‘war-mongering Japanese-bastards’. It was obvious he thought being favored to live through the ordeal on Truk had not been so much for himself as for others. He felt shame that all of his efforts had been on behalf of the detestable Japanese. He determined that with the same degree of shame he had experienced, he would devote his life to working for Korea” (My translation, see section 7.3).

With this passage we see that, though Mr. Lee’s time on Truk island had been a harrowing experience, the most troubling thing for him was the realization that all of his efforts had merely aided the Japanese. In order to remove the feelings of guilt he has for his actions Mr. Lee goes on to rid himself of his past by burning all of his belongings, even his home. This way he can make a new start with a clean slate. With this story, An Hoenam is also ridding himself of his past—a past that was highly critical of the leftist movement in colonial Korea. After liberation An Hoenam eventually turned to the left and “Fire” is in a small way his attempt at self-criticism and putting his past behind him.

In “Before and After Liberation” (Haebang chŏnhu, 1946), Yi T’aejun also conveys a sense of self-criticism, though not in the overt way portrayed in “Fire” and “Milestones”. Hyŏn, the character in the story, was a writer who “would rather quit writing than write in Japanese or collaborate” and moved his family to a village in Kang’won Province in order to ponder the course his own writing should take. That Hyŏn is contented to, in the words of his wife, “move to the countryside and live out their lives in peace, farming” is evidence of Hyŏn’s bourgeois tendencies and shows a lack of commitment to social causes. Further proof
of this is Hyŏn’s own reason for choosing the village: “...the Imjin river was close by and he could while away his time fishing.” This mirrors the actions and attitudes of Yi T’aejun in the last few years of the colonial period before liberation (Chŏng Hyŏn’gi, 1989). By telling the story of his own actions and describing his motivation and attitude toward the situations of the time rather than downplaying or even trying to hide them, Yi T’aejun is in effect exposing and criticizing himself. He is laying himself bare for everyone to see what he had done. By describing his actions throughout the rest of the story and the change in his actions and attitudes after liberation, Yi’s condemnation of his pre-liberation activities is obvious. In this clever way Yi T’aejun is able to remove the actions of his past that were opposed to the proletarian literature movement of the colonial period. And then naturally he was able to make the change to the leftist cause after liberation.

2.3 The Return of Overseas Koreans and the Loss of Home.

With the annexation of Korea in 1910 by the Japanese, more and more Koreans found themselves out of land to farm. This lack of farmland, combined with encouragement from Japanese authorities, led many Koreans to leave Korea in search of greener pastures. During the Japanese colonial period millions of Koreans went to Manchuria, Japan, and Russia. This large-scale migration out of Korea and the life Koreans found overseas was a major theme of novels and short stories in the 1920’s and 30’s (O Yangho, 1989). As Japan entered the Pacific war many Koreans were taken to Japan or sent to the Pacific islands as slave-laborers. Others were conscripted into the Japanese Imperial Army to defend the Pacific islands and the Japanese home islands from the allied invasion. Still others were sent as soldiers to the Kwantung army in Manchuria. The fear that had been instilled into the Korean people of being conscripted by the Japanese is echoed in several works from the liberation period. The following is from “A Tale of Two Rice Paddies” (Non iyagi, 1946) by Ch’ae Mansik:

“Han Saengwŏn had always bowed to and shown respect to the village chairman, labor division employees and other village employees. He had done all this so that Yonggil, his one and only grandson, raised by his own hands after the boy’s
father had died early in life, might not be chosen for the work draft” (Ch’ae, 1996).

Note also how the following example from “Before and After Liberation” (Haebang chǒnhu, 1946) by Yi T’aejun reflects this fear:

“Since this community doctor had been sent off to Seoul for six long months of training, Hyŏn couldn’t ensure that he would escape the draft” (My translation, see section 8.4).

Those who lost their farmland and left Korea for agricultural opportunities seldom found them. Hyŏn Chin’gŏn’s story “Hometown” (Kohyang, 1926) describes Koreans going to Manchuria to make better lives for themselves. It describes the difficulties experienced finding land to farm. When the refugees finally did find an area to settle down in and after years of hard work had made it into something, they had it taken away by the Japanese—the same problem they were escaping by coming to Manchuria in the first place (O Yangho, 1989).

“From this time on such expressions as ‘Can’t take it anymore,’ or ‘Can’t keep on like this,’ never stopped coming out of the villagers’ mouths. Families began to leave the village seeking new homes elsewhere and the village began to decay” (Hyŏn, 1926, translated by O Yangho, 1989 p. 4).

The situation of those laboring in the mines of Japan or toiling for the Japanese war effort elsewhere was a deplorable existence at best. An Hoenam’s “Fire” gives vivid illustration to the horrors these laborers suffered:

“According to what Mr. Lee said, the Japanese had deceived him and he had been shipped off to Truk as soon as he left Korea. He was there for about four years. At first, he worked building the airstrip. Then he was forced to undergo training as a cadet in the defense unit. Of course he could not write any letters home and today it had been hinted that this was partly to blame for the tragedy that had befallen his family.

When Saipan, and then the Philippines fell to the Americans, food on Truk suddenly became quite scarce. They had just managed to survive on a ration of one
potato a day. Later they caught and ate rats and lizards and whatever else they could find; some people even resorted to cannibalism” (My translation, see section 7.3).

Upon liberation from Japan and with the thought of having their country back, many of these agricultural refugees and overseas laborers streamed home. Between August 1945 and April 1948 over 2.5 million people returned to Korea (Nahm, 1988). Yi Uyong (1991) writes that for these people, liberation resulted in the return to the motherland.

As mentioned above, “Fire” (Pul, 1946) relates the experiences of conscripted Korean laborers working for the Japanese war effort. The story also talks about Mr. Lee’s return to Korea after liberation and describes the life Mr. Lee finds there. While Mr. Lee had been away for four years, his family had gone to ruins:

“While he was away his household suffered many hardships and tragedies. His father died within a year after he left. His brother-in-law (who was considered a son by Mr. Lee’s mother) was taken to work in a coal mine on Hokkaido with the Japanese Army. This is how Mr. Lee’s mother, his wife and sister came to be “three widows” living together. But Mr. Lee did not return. When his brother-in-law had returned from Hokkaido last October, Mr. Lee’s mother had moved in with her daughter. Mr. Lee’s wife was now all alone and, having lost her only son to smallpox the previous year, she ran off” (My translation, see section 7.3).

This situation confronted Mr. Lee upon his return to Korea and demonstrates another common situation that arose as a direct result of the return of overseas Koreans—the loss of home. Im Hŏnyŏng (1987) states that the liberation period is characterized by the loss of home rather than by a return to the old homesite as a consequence of the termination of colonial rule. The expectancy and excitement of homecoming soon changed to disillusionment and this in turn led to the phenomenon of leaving home, culminating in a concentration of population in Seoul and other cities (p. 30).

This loss of home is clearly seen in the case of Mr. Lee in “Fire.” When Mr. Lee returned to Korea he was initially confronted with the hopeless circumstances of the loss of his wife and family. Throughout the rest of the story we see Mr. Lee’s determination to leave
his past and his home. In the case of Mr. Lee, An Hoenam portrays his loss of home in a positive light. Mr. Lee, with nothing left of his life to greet him upon his return from overseas, purges the last remnants of his miserable life through arson and leaves his home happy—looking for a new life and bright future.

This loss of home is also reflected in "Chŏm-nye" (1947) and "The Ritual at the Well" (Umul ch’inŭn p’unggyŏng, 1948) by Ch’oe Chōnhŭi (1912-1990). Though the loss of home described here did not come as a result of a return to Korea from abroad, it still came about as a result of liberation. Peasants in Korea ended up landless and homeless as the holdings of large landlords were broken up after liberation. A policy was set in place where the land was offered up for sale, but as Ch’oe (1983) states in these stories, none of the poor farmers could afford to buy the land and so were left with no alternative but to leave their homes.

2.4 Bright Futures and Dashed Dreams.

With liberation came the return of Korea to the Korean people. This brought with it hope and high expectations for Koreans. There are many examples of the hope of a bright future in the short fiction of the liberation period. In "Fire" (Pul, 1946) by An Hoenam, the main character, Mr. Lee, tells the narrator, An Hoenam:

"...When I was dragged off to Truk, I was weighted down with many worries, but not now, not any more. Don’t you worry about me. It’s just like you said, Mr. An—now that Korea has been liberated, my future will be brighter. I’m off to find it..." (My translation, see section 7.3).

"Constable Maeng" (Maeng Sunsa, 1946), by Ch’ae Mansik also conveys the opening of opportunity that liberation brought:

"It seemed that the world was full of money and that there were plenty of jobs and an abundance of goods" (My translation, see section 7.1).

The optimism shown on the part of Han Saengwŏn in "A Tale of Two Rice Paddies" (Non iyagi, 1946), also by Ch’ae Mansik, is a bit different from the general optimism of
Koreans for the future of the country as a whole. Han Saengwŏn had squandered away his family’s land holdings by selling them to get out of debt to a Japanese landlord early in the colonial period. He had convinced himself, and always told others in the village, that when the Japanese were driven out he would get his land back. When Japan was defeated and the Japanese left Korea he was overjoyed:

“‘You see, Song Saengwŏn, what I said was right wasn’t it?’ Han Saengwŏn, his wrinkled face covered with short, white stubble, smiled gently with his five remaining yellow teeth.

‘That’s what I figured. No matter how shrewd those bastards may be, is it possible for them to drive stakes into the four corners of the rice fields and heave them off as if they were some sort of devils?’

To Han Saengwŏn there was something even more exciting in Japan’s surrender on August fifteenth, the day Chosŏn had become independent. To think that what he had said, like a prophecy, had come true... To think that, just like he had said, the land he had turned over to the Japanese, like a dream, would be returned and be his again... There could be nothing in this world so wonderful and rare” (Ch’ae, 1996).

But the dreams of a bright future were soon dashed. Koreans, in fact, did not have their country back. First the Soviet army occupied the northern half of Korea and then later the Americans occupied the southern half of the peninsula. With the liberation from the Japanese came the realization that Korea was still not free from foreign domination. Also came the realization that even though Japanese tyranny had ended it had merely been replaced by the tyranny of fellow Koreans. Even though the hope for a bright future is portrayed in some of the short stories of the liberation period, many writers chose to write in a pessimistic tone as the true realities of liberation came to light (Yi Uyong, 1991).

Another look at “A Tale of Two Rice Paddies” (Non iyagi, 1946) by Ch’ae Mansik reveals the turn in Han Saengwŏn’s attitude towards Korea when he realizes his claim on his former paddies might not be valid. He had assumed that with the Japanese leaving, the land
that he had sold to a Japanese entrepreneur years before would automatically revert to his ownership. When he learns that it is now the Korean government’s land and that it is for sale if he wants to buy it, he can bear it no longer.

“Bullshit! From today on I’m a citizen without a country again. Shiiiiit, I lived thirty-six years without a country. A country and its government ought to do something to show appreciation for its people. Then the people, too, would believe in their country and trust their government. We’re independent! they say, then they up and take away the people’s land and sell it for a profit. You call that a country” (Ch’ae, 1996)?!

Perhaps his claim on this land was misguided, but this story shows the reality and frustration of the farmers who had their land usurped and now, upon liberation, realized that there would be no justice rendered them. This echoes the sentiment Koreans felt when they learned that even though the Japanese were gone, they were still under the domination of other foreign powers—the United States and the Soviet Union.

“Constable Maeng” (Maeng Sunsa, 1946), by Ch’ae Mansik, also gives a good illustration of this realization that the bright future the Korean people sought in liberation was in fact a dashed dream and that the tyranny of the Japanese was replaced by tyranny on the part of fellow Koreans. After Maeng returns to work as a constable he ends up working with a newly recruited young constable with whom he had been acquainted in the past. Noma, the new constable, had been a gang member and had been released on several occasions by constable Maeng after being arrested. Constable Maeng could not believe that someone like Noma could possibly be a constable.

Then constable Maeng encounters another, even worse, criminal from his past. Constable Maeng had been a jail guard when Kang Pongse had been locked up for robbery and murder. Now with liberation, Kang Pongse had also become a constable. This fact frightened constable Maeng so much that he ended up quitting the police force. At the end of the story comes the realization to constable Maeng that he, as a constable, had been no different than the murderer:

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“Come to think of it, was there ever really a difference between constables and murderers? All we ever did was extort goods and kill innocent people. Yep, being a constable or a murderer is one and the same” (My translation, see section 7.1).

Ch’ae Mansik is telling us that the old tyranny Koreans faced under Japanese colonialism has merely been replaced by fellow Koreans with liberation. Nothing had changed. The dream was dashed and there was no bright future.

To describe the plight of the farming peasantry in Korea during the colonial period as difficult would be a gross understatement. In “The Ritual at the Well” (Umul ch’inün p’unggyǒng, 1948) by Ch’oe Chǒnhuǐ, we learn just how hard it was for these people to make a living:

“They had worked this land which belonged to the landlord and each year had returned his quota of rice. What remained was far from enough for one year, six months or even two months ...” (Ch’oe, 1983 p. 157).

With liberation, sweeping land reforms were proposed to help the plight of the poor farmers, very few of whom were not tenants on the farms of wealthy landlords. The Americans were able to pass legislation that sharply reduced the quotas that were placed on yearly crops by landlords as payment for using the land. Then legislation was proposed that would eliminate absentee landlordism and reduce the amount of land one family could farm to 7.5 acres (Nahm, 1988). But this reform actually made things worse for these people, as reflected in “Chǒm-nye” (1947) also by Ch’oe Chǒnhuǐ:

“Imagine a farm of ten thousand p’yǒng with one hundred tenants who, under the old system, experienced more days with an empty stomach than a full one. Where would they get money to buy the land? The land each has cultivated will be sold. When the land is sold the tenant can no longer cultivate the land but must move. From that day on starvation begins” (Ch’oe, 1983 p. 137).

With liberation from the Japanese the thoughts of having their own country back brought hope to the Korean people. But this hope soon vanished and was replaced by the reality that the tyranny of the Japanese had merely been switched for the tyranny of the Americans and
fellow Koreans. Perhaps Han Saengwŏn from “A Tale of Two Rice Paddies” (Non iyagi, 1946) speaks on behalf of many when he is awakened to this cold fact:

“Sure Korea was independent, but there wasn’t a chance in hell that things would suddenly improve for a poor farmer. These poor farmers would continue renting others’ land, sweating like dogs and working for a year only to starve off what was left after they had surrendered over half of their crops. Things remained the same as before. Whether Korea was independent or not it was all the same” (Ch’ae, 1996).

2.5 Plight of Peasants and Land Reform.

The conditions in which the farmers of Korea lived and how they fared before and after liberation is detailed in several short stories written during the liberation period. Before the Japanese annexed Korea in 1910 most land was privately held by a minority of large landlords and the land was farmed by peasants who were small land owners, tenants or agricultural laborers (Palais, 1976). The inequality of the landlord/peasant relationship is well reflected in the following passage from “Chŏm-nye” (1947) by Ch’oe Chŏnghŭi:

“It would seem natural that one would question why it was that some lived one way while others lived another way. These people had never cut their finger nails or toe nails because they had worn down from work. And yet, they never had enough to eat. Did they never question why the others dressed so well, or had enough to eat, or lived without stress and strain? These thoughts never once crossed their minds. It never occurred to them to be resentful nor to feel regret or to think that their treatment was unjust. It was taken for granted that life in the big house was one way and for them another way. This way of thinking had become second nature, a tradition. These traditions and habits were not the practice of one or two years or something that had been carried on for ten or twenty years. These wretched habits and these tragic traditions were the result of hundreds of years of living like slaves” (Ch’oe, 1983 pp. 133-134).
Another example of the injustice experienced by one family under this system is related by Ch’ae Mansik in “A Tale of Two Rice Paddies” (Non iyagi, 1948). The story describes first how it was possible for the family to acquire a few acres of paddyland through scrimping and hard work. Then Ch’ae goes on to relate how, through a miscarriage of justice, the land was taken away by the local magistrate.

“Korea had become a country where the town magistrate, local gentry, and petty officials practiced extortion, arrested people and took them off to be beaten, and displayed their arrogance, all the while waiting anxiously to receive the rice tax in the name of the country. They did all this pretending not to notice that people were dying all around them” (Ch’ae, 1996).

Then the Japanese took over Korea and things stayed about the same for the family:

“Han Saengwŏn didn’t find that living as Japanese subjects was any worse than when he lived as a subject of Chosŏn prior to 1910. As before, he was a poor tenant farmer working someone else’s land, he paid over half his income as sharecrops and gave what remained as offerings. The arrogance and oppression of the patrolmen, the Japanese, or the ward clerks was no worse than the arrogance and oppression of the local Korean gentry and magistrates, but it wasn’t any better either” (Ch’ae, 1996).

Still, for many farming families, living conditions worsened with the annexation of Korea by Japan. Through the implementation of land reform policies the Japanese tried to improve tenant /landowner relations. However, through ignorance of laws and rights and through the greed of landlords, peasants came to be dispossessed of what little holdings they had and were forced into higher rates of tenancy (Cumings, 1981). In Mr. Pang (Misūt’ŏ pang, 1946), Ch’ae Mansik tells of a landlord that charged eighty percent of the annual rice crop in tenancy fees. Rates this high didn’t leave enough food for these farmers to live on for more than a few months.

Ch’oe Chŏnghŭi describes the dire circumstances of these farmers in “The Ritual at the Well” (Umul ch’iinŭn p’unggyŏng, 1948). She writes of the farmers in the village not
having enough to eat and being forced to forage for tree bark, roots, grass and other greens from the mountains. She also describes how these people felt about their constant hunger:

“When someone died the only comment made by those who watched the funeral procession was, ‘Now you won’t have to starve, that’s good.’ Do you think I am telling an untruth? No, truly to these people starvation was a curse. They ate but since there was never enough they were always hungry” (Ch’oe, 1983 p. 160).

She then finishes off her thought on people’s hunger with the following:

“How is it that people who can grow rice should be hungry? What is the reason why they can’t eat their fill of rice? It would be no problem if they could eat barley or some other grain instead of something like rye which is slimy and causes diarrhea” (Ch’oe, 1983 pp. 162-163).

With Japan’s defeat and Korea’s liberation, many people were overjoyed and looked towards a bright future with hope. But Ch’ae Mansik in “A Tale of Two Rice Paddies” (Non iyagi, 1946) reflects how farmers felt about liberation:

“The country that had been taken away by the Japanese was regained. To Han Saengwon there was nothing pleasing in the people’s ravings about having their country back again. Han Saengwon didn’t think that regaining their country was anything different from returning back to the days of the old Korea” (Ch’ae, 1996).

In fact, according to Ch’oe Chonghui, things got even worse for the farmers of Korea:

“The majority of Landlord Ch’oe’s property was sold to farmers from other villages who already owned their own land. About thirty percent of the land remained in the hands of these villagers. At that, no house had more than two or three rice paddies. Previously they had worked this land which belonged to the landlord and each year had returned his quota of rice. What remained was far from enough for one year, six months or even two months. In fact, it wasn’t sufficient for even one month so where would they find the money with which to buy the land? Would money fall from the sky because of liberation?

As a result the lives of those villagers, who no longer had the right to work the
land, became a living hell” (Ch’oe, 1983 p. 157).

With liberation there was an attempt to improve the lot of the farmers of Korea, but as shown here, the immediate result of liberation was not an improvement in the lives of these people.

2.6 Collaboration.

During the colonial period the Japanese skillfully divided the Korean populace and pitted different groups against each other (Cumings, 1981). Many Koreans within the world of literature, as well as in society in general, acted with complicity in cooperating with the Japanese to one degree or another. There was intense pressure from Japanese authorities to cooperate and many writers, whether from direct or perceived threats and/or out of a sense of self preservation, produced works that were pro-Japanese. Other writers like Yi Kwangsu and Ch’oe Namsŏn actively joined the Japanese war effort, making pro-Japanese speeches and producing works in the Japanese language (Yu Beong Cheon [sic], 1992). However there were some writers like Han Yong’un (1897-1944) who refused to cooperate with the Japanese altogether. It has been stated that a majority of Korean writers ‘broke their writing brushes’ and went into hiding rather than cooperate with the Japanese (Tonguk Kim. 1980). But it is evident that many writers continued to produce right up until liberation in 1945 (Yun Pyŏngno, 1991).

With liberation there was a call for the removal and a cleansing of collaborators and traitors (Yi Uyong, 1993). These efforts consisted mainly of self- and group criticism by those involved in the literary groups that sprang up after liberation. But some writers were eventually arrested and tried for their crimes against Korea after the Syngman Rhee government came to power in 1948 (Yu Beong Cheon [sic], 1992). This effort to come to terms with the problems collaboration caused for society was reflected in some of the short fiction from the liberation period. “Constable Maeng” (Maeng Sunsa, 1946) by Ch’ae Mansik deals with this issue in a satirical way and will be discussed in detail in section 5.2.
2.7 Anti-Japanism.

It is understandable that after more than three decades of domination by the Japanese, some writers chose to refer to the Japanese in derogatory terms once Korea was liberated. Though not a major theme in the short fiction from the period, an undercurrent of Anti-Japanism is evident in many works. In “Milestones” (Tojong, 1948) by Chi Hayŏn, the main character, Sŏkjæ is perplexed at the response of a young lad upon hearing that Emperor Hirohito has just surrendered. The boy says how sorry he feels for the Emperor and remarks that what has happened is too bad. Sŏkjæ replies:

“Emperor Hirohito took our country from us and persecuted us Koreans for forty years. ‘Felt sorry’ for him, what do you mean ‘felt sorry’?” (My translation, see section 7.2)?

Sŏkjæ goes on to describe the Japanese as being detestable; the way in which they treated Koreans is how they should be treated now that Korea has been liberated from them.

We also have an example of anti-Japanese feelings in “Fire” (Pul, 1946) by An Hoenam. Mr. Lee, the protagonist of this story, is talking about the war and the Japanese who waged it:

“He spoke in a strange, aroused tone when describing the victims of the war and when talking about the ‘war-mongering Japanese-bastards’” (My translation, see section 7.3).

Ch’ae Mansik in “Constable Maeng” (Maeng sunsa, 1946) refers to the Japanese in a derogatory way. At the end of the story when the constable has just had an encounter with a murderer and robber released from prison by the Japanese authorities and now wearing the uniform of a constable, Constable Maeng says the following about the Japanese:

“I thought only dissidents and political prisoners were supposed to be released. But they’ve gone and let all the dangerous felons and murderers loose too. Is that bloody-minded or what? It’s no wonder they lost the war with that kind of thinking” (Ch’ae, 1999)!

Anti-Japanese sentiments are also portrayed in the “Tale of Two Rice Paddies” (Non
iyagi, 1946) by Ch’ae Mansik. The Japanese are described in the following way:

“The Japanese were savages, sons who blow smoke in their father’s faces, brothers and sisters who married incestuously. These snake-eating Japs strutted around arrogantly, and the police officers and military police, because of their swords, could treat the Chosŏn people like dogs and pigs, ordering them to pay their offerings, ordering them to go out to the work draft, ordering them not to try to cheat them, all the while continuing to make trouble. Saying, ‘Japan is our country’, ‘We are Japanese’, and forcing us to do things we didn’t want to do. This is the kind of country we lived in” (Ch’ae, 1996).

Throughout the story there is a feeling of contempt for the Japanese.

“Before and After Liberation” (Haebang chŏnhu, 1946) by Yi T’aejun also contains passages that portray anti-Japanese sentiments. In the beginning of the story Yi describes how Hyŏn, the main character of the story, feels it is like murder to have to go and fight against and kill Americans, Chinese, English and Russian soldiers all on behalf of Japan--Korea’s enemy. Later in the story when Hyŏn is having a discussion with his elderly friend Kim Chigwŏn about the future of Korea after Japanese domination, Kim says the following:

“You bet I do. But I want to bring it back more for revenge on those Japanese sons-of-bitches than because common guys like me are loyal subjects” (My translation, see section 7.2).

The tone of these anti-Japanese sentiments ranges from the main character’s mild criticism of the Japanese in “Constable Maeng” to the outright hatred expressed by Han Saengwŏn in “A Tale of Two Rice Paddies.” With the end of the Japanese colonial period and the formation of literary groups, calls were made to rid Korea of the vestiges of the Japanese (Yi Uyong, 1993 and Kwŏn, 1989). In the varying ways shown here authors were venting their feelings toward the thirty-six years of Japanese colonialism.
3.0 Authors.

3.1 Introduction.

As discussed earlier, authors aligned themselves to the right or left of the political spectrum after liberation. The pure-literature camp was to the right and is represented by Kim Tongni and Hwang Sunwŏn who have already had significant research devoted to their works and who are relatively well served in English translation. The proletarian or leftist writers are represented here by Yi T’aejun, Chi Hayŏn and An Hoenam. Ch’ae Mansik represents those writers who chose neither side but walked their own course—writing artfully but with a clear social message. Also represented here are writers who changed from the pure-literature camp to the leftist side after liberation like An Hoenam and Yi T’aejun. No work of this size could possibly hope to cover all the writers who were active during the liberation period. But an attempt is made here to introduce a few that stood out.

3.2 Ch’ae Mansik.

Ch’ae Mansik was born in the North Chŏlla province village of Ŭmnae. Growing up he was educated in Korean schools and then in 1922 he went to Japan to study at an institute affiliated with Waseda University (Kim Sangsŏn, 1989). He remained in Japan for only a short time before returning to Korea to take up a teaching job at a private school. It was at this time in 1924 that his first short story “In Three Directions” (Se killo 1924) was published. In 1925 Ch’ae went to work as a newspaper reporter for the Tong’a Ilbo (Han Suyŏng, 1996).

The rest of the 1920’s saw only a few more works by Ch’ae. But in the 1930’s he began to produce in earnest. Ch’ae was an industrious writer and his works included short stories, drama, criticism, contes, novellas and full-length novels. In the early 1930’s Ch’ae was influenced by the proletarian literature movement and the writers of KAPF. Through his writing Ch’ae Mansik took up the cause of the industrial laborers and peasants who were at the lowest level of the Korean social structure. Ch’ae wrote about the deplorable and
exhausting conditions these Koreans were forced to work under (Han Suyŏng, 1996).

However, the critics and thinkers in KAPF began to steer the organization toward the role of shaping writer’s output solely as a tool for proletarian class struggle. Ch’ae disagreed with their methodology and dogmatic approach and distanced himself from KAPF and the proletarian literature movement (Kim Sangsŏn, 1989). He continued writing according to his own ideology which was a mixture of social consciousness and art. In 1934 he published “A Ready Made Life” (Redi meidū insaeng, 1934). This story is a scathing sketch of the social structure created by the Japanese. Ch’ae uses irony to make his point about the hopelessness of life for university-educated Koreans under colonial rule (Cho Ch’anghwan, 1997). P, the protagonist in the story, was determined not to let his son’s life be ruined like his own had been. P even took this to the point of putting his nine-year old son to work in a trade and depriving him of schooling.

Ch’ae Mansik also employed satire and sarcasm skillfully in his writing to drive home his point in a poignant way. Peace Under Heaven (T’aep’yŏng Ch’ŏnha, 1938) is a sarcastic attack on the benefits of imperial domination and colonization (Cho Ch’anghwan, 1997). Another distinguishing characteristic of Ch’ae Mansik’s writing style is that he never shows his characters directly overcoming injustices and difficulties but instead shows how these injustices and difficulties harden people (Han Suyŏng, 1996).

After Liberation, Ch’ae Mansik continued writing in his own way. In the renewed debate over the direction of national literature Ch’ae trod a path somewhere between the “art for art’s sake” crowd and the radical left. He felt that the injustices that had continued into the liberation period could be overcome by describing those injustices in his literature (Han Suyŏng, 1996).

Ch’ae’s first short story of the liberation period was “Constable Maeng” (Maeng Sunsa 1946). In the same year he also wrote “Mister Bang” (Misŭt’ŏ Bang 1946) and “A Tale of Two Rice Paddies” (Non Iyagi, 1946). All three stories compare life in Korea before and after liberation. There is a stark realization on the part of the reader that with liberation, the tyranny of the Japanese colonial period had not really gone away. The Japanese were
replaced by the Americans. For their part, the Americans initially left the administrative structure employed by the Japanese intact (Cumings, 1981). Koreans were soon to learn that their fellow Koreans who had prospered under the Japanese regime would come to play important leadership roles in the new American-backed administration. The result was that the Korean people who for so long had hoped for liberation from the tyranny of the Japanese had suddenly been liberated from the Japanese but not from injustice and tyranny.

As mentioned above, collaboration with the Japanese was a cold reality during the colonial period. In the last few years leading up to the liberation of 1945 Ch’ae Mansik produced several pro-Japanese works (Kim Yunsik, 1981). In 1948 Ch’ae Mansik wrote “Public Offender” (Minjok-ui choein, 1948). This autobiographical work is a soul-searching effort on the part of the author to come to terms with his life and actions during the final years of the colonial period. And it is a confession for not doing more during the first years after liberation to help the situation of the Korean people (Kim Sangoon, 1989).

From his first published work in the 1920’s until his death in 1950, Ch’ae Mansik’s writing style remained consistent (Kim Ponggun, 1988). Even when the oppressive censorship of the Japanese authorities was lifted and with the freedom of expression found in the liberation period, Ch’ae’s works continued to be characterized by humorous sketches where situations were twisted to make the point. But more than a mere humorist, Ch’ae Mansik skillfully used sarcasm, satire and irony to criticize the injustices that he found in Korean society during and after Japanese colonialism.

Ch’ae Mansik will be remembered as one of the great writers of Korean fiction. He wrote for the Korean people. The colloquial style of his prose, combined with masterfully crafted dialogue, leaves the reader with a sense of being part of the story. In an era when so much politicizing of literature was taking place in Korea, Ch’ae was able to walk the thin line between ideology and art and skillfully weave the two together into a fabric that was influential to the growth of modern Korean literature.
3.3 Chi Hayon.

Chi Hayon was born in 1912 in Koch’ang in south Kyōngsang province. She grew up in Masan, and was educated in Tokyo at Sohwa Girls’ High School and then at the Tokyo School of Economics (Tonggyŏng Kyŏngje Chŏnmun Hakkyo). Around the time of the breakup of KAPF she met and married the prominent Korean leftist literary figure, Im Hwa. Im had been arrested with the breakup of KAPF. The two met while Im was recuperating in Masan after gaining his release from prison on account of illness (Yi Uyong, 1993).

Chi’s first work, “Kyŏlbyŏl,” was published in 1940. She also published works in 1941 and 1942 but then as Korea was thrust into the ‘dark age’ of increased Japanese militarism Chi did not publish for six years. Finally, in 1946 she ended her spell of non-production with the publication of “Milestones” (Tojong 1946).

Little is known about Chi Hayon’s life. It is known that immediately after liberation she joined the Center for the Construction of Korean Literature (Chosŏn munhak kŏnsŏl ponbu) which her husband, Im Hwa, had helped organize. The two of them were active in the development of the leftist literary movement in Seoul until they went north in 1947 with many other leftist writers (Kwŏn, 1989).

Chi Hayon has not left us many works—only seven stories in her short career. However, her short story “Milestones” (Tojong, 1946) is an interesting look into the leftist movement in Korea. It was selected as a finalist for the literary award given by the Korean Writers’ League in 1946 but lost out to Yi T’aejun’s “Before and After Liberation” (Haebang Chŏnhu, 1946) (Yi Uyong, 1993).

3.4 An Hoenam.

An Hoenam was born in Seoul in 1909. He was the only child of An Kuksŏn (1878-1926), a novelist from the ‘new novel’ period (approx. 1906-1917). He was schooled in Korea where he first attended elementary school. Then, after passing the entrance exam, he studied at Hwimun-dong school but was forced to drop out in his fourth year because of problems at home. He began working for the magazine Creation (Kaebyŏk) in 1925. And it
was with the 1931 publication of “Pal” (Hair, 1931) in the Chosŏn Ilbo that An Hoenam launched his career as a writer (Kim Sŏnghwan, 1991).

An Hoenam’s early works tended to focus on recollections and reminiscences of his father and family. “Smoke” (Yŏn’gi, 1933), “Meditation” (Myŏngsang, 1937) and “Melancholy” (Susim, 1933) were all nostalgic stories about social status and aristocratic self-awareness and focused on An’s father’s happiness. The sadness and melancholy from the loss of this privileged status is also sensed in his writings (Sin Sujŏng, 1996).

In 1935, after years working at Creation (Kaebyŏk), An started working in a company and then in 1936, after wandering from place to place, he moved to the village of Chont’i in South Ch’ungch’ŏng province. There he did some farming and continued writing. In September 1944 he was conscripted by the Japanese authorities along with 134 of his fellow locals to work in the coal mines on North Kyushu for the war effort. Upon arriving at the mine, An was recommended for the fume control department and went to work in the mine office. Upon liberation he returned to South Ch’ungch’ŏng province, reunited with his family and moved to Seoul (Sin Sujŏng, 1996).

An Hoenam resumed writing and involved himself in the literary movement. He was one of the founding members of the Committee for the Construction of Korean Literature (Chosŏn munhak kŏnsŏl ponbu) that was organized by Im Hwa two days after liberation. He was also involved in organizing the literature conferences that took place right after liberation (Yi Uyong, 1991). The subject of An’s early post-liberation writings is described by Kim Yunsik (1979) as being largely stories of conscription. “Breaking Chains” (Ch’ŏlswae kkŭnhŏjida, 1946) and “Coal mine” (T’an’gaeng, 1945) as well as “The Ox” (So, 1946) are stories of An’s personal experiences working in the coal mine on northern Kyushu. These stories all talk of the life faced by those conscripted into the service of the Japanese war effort. The stories also bring to light some of the fears and anxieties experienced by these forced laborers. In the case of “The Ox” (So, 1946), the main character Samnyŏng, whose nickname was ox, felt some misgivings at being sent to Japan to work:

“A month before I was conscripted, we had to offer up our ox for the food
quota... The chairman's ox was supposed to go but you know... When you consider the age of the ox and how it worked for us, the ox shouldn't have been grabbed, you know. The same kind of ox from the chairman's house was supposed to go, but they took ours to the slaughter house instead. . . jeez, it was unfair. And you know, I have been sent here just like that ox. The day the ox left our home it died. I left my home and I have felt like I would die just like that ox. Truly we have all been sent here to die. . . just like the ox at the slaughterhouse, getting its brains dashed out by an ax. Working in this cave here, we could have the same thing happen to us if a big rock fell on our heads. Here in the cave I'm always thinking about the ox. It seems I'll die the same way. But the guys always call me ox, not knowing what I'm feeling inside. When they see me, isn’t it just like saying 'Die!' to the ox? So you, Mr. An, are the only one I trust" (An, 1997 pp. 172-173, my translation).

Another feature of the conscription stories of An Hoenam is the way he relates these conscripts' feelings when they return to Korea. A good example of this is found in "Fire" (Pul, 1946). Mr. Lee, the main character of the story, was conscripted to work on the Pacific islands during the war. While he is away from Korea, his father and son both die and his wife leaves with another man. With his family and life in ruins upon his return to Korea Mr. Lee is determined to make a new start. In order to do this he must remove his past. Arson is his method of choice. Mr. Lee had become quite familiar with fire on Truk island:

"The bombardment of Truk Island could not be described in any other way but as a sea of flames" (My translation, see section 7.3).

And at this festive time of year--the Taeborûm festival--fire was traditionally used to rejuvenate the fields for the new growing season. It was also the way in which Mr. Lee determined to remove his past. The narrator and Mr. Lee have dinner together and then go to Mr. Lee's home. While they are there Mr. Lee proceeds to carry all of his belongings into the courtyard and then sets fire to them. The narrator stops him and consoles him. But later that night Mr. Lee's home goes up in flames.

"I remembered Mr. Lee wanting to burn his house before I had stopped him. It
looked like he had gotten his way in the end. I imagined him setting his house ablaze and then climbing the hill to watch it burn from a distance while the moon shone down on him” (My translation, see section 7.3).

With that, Mr. Lee had rid himself of his past hardships and troubles and looked forward to the future with hope.

“I saw Mr. Lee once more after that. He seemed sharper and more composed than before. It was as if he had changed in an instant into another person.” — (He said) “I’m going to seek out a new life and a new world.” — “It’s just like you said, Mr. An—now that Korea has been liberated, my future will be brighter. I’m off to find it...” (My translation, see section 7.3).

Before liberation An Hoenam was not involved with the leftist movement at all. In fact he was reported to have called KAPF a ‘monster’. This fact, along with his apparent speedy conversion to the leftist movement after liberation, have led some to call him an opportunist. It also led Im Hwa and Kim Namch’ön to level criticism at him (Kim Sûng hwân, 1995). And it has been asserted that he saw the momentum in the leftist movement following liberation and became extremely active in the leftist cause in order to counteract what he had said about KAPF. Evidence of his lack of full conversion could possibly be seen in the fact that when most of the leftist writers had gone north in 1947 and early 1948 An stayed in Seoul, even publishing “The Sorrow of the Farmers” (Nongmin ùi piae, 1948), his last story of the liberation period. He finally went north in 1949. More evidence of the activity of An Hoenam is that in the three-year liberation period he produced 15 short stories and wrote 18 articles on criticism. Compare that with Han Sôrya’s two stories and Yi T’aegun’s three short stories and nine works of criticism and it is apparent how busy An Hoenam made himself during the liberation period.

3.5 Yi T’aegun.

Yi T’aegun was born in 1904 in Sammyöngni in Kangwôn Province. In 1909 Yi’s father was exiled and the family moved to Vladivostok. That same year his father died and
the family returned to Korea where Yi T’aejun attended a village school in North Hamgyŏng province. With the death of Yi’s mother three years later Yi returned to his hometown in Kangwŏn Province to live with relatives (Chŏng Hyŏn’gi, 1989).

Yi T’aejun continued his studies and graduated from Pongmyŏng school in his hometown in 1918 at the age of fifteen. After graduation Yi attended an agricultural school for a short time and then worked for a period as an errand boy in a produce brokerage house in Wonsan. It was at this time that Yi T’aejun determined to take control of his life. He went to Seoul in 1920 and applied to take the entrance examination for the prestigious Paeje school. But, lacking the money for tuition, he was unable to register and so hung out on the streets. Then in 1921, by selling books and what not, he was able to scrape together enough money for tuition and entered the Hwimun high school (Chŏng Hyŏn’gi, 1989).

In 1924, at the age of twenty-one, Yi worked as the literary editor for the school magazine Hwimun. At this same time he wrote a six-volume children’s story “The Story of the Fish” (Mulkogi iyagi) for the school magazine. It was at this period in his life that he began to exhibit some rebellious behavior. In 1924 he was forced to leave school for being a ringleader in a school strike. Yi then went to Japan to study (Chŏng Hyŏn’gi, 1989).

In 1925, Yi published his first serious work of literature- the children’s story “The girls of the Five Dreams” (O mongnyŏ, 1925) in the Times Daily and launched his literary career. In 1927 he entered preparatory classes for Jōchi University in Tokyo, but dropped out and returned to Korea. Upon his return to Korea, Yi worked as a reporter for the magazine Creation (Kaebyŏk) and was also active editing for the magazines Student (Haksaeng) and New Life (Sinsaeng) (Chŏng Hyŏn’gi, 1989).

Throughout the 1930’s and into the early 40’s, Yi T’aejun was a prolific writer who focused on the short story. Yi’s early works were essays and youth stories. In 1933 Yi was involved in the founding and leadership of the Kuinhoe or “Group of Nine”--a group of literarians that was opposed to the proletarian literature movement of KAPF and in support of pure literature (Yi Uyong, 1993). In 1943 Yi T’aejun quit writing and took his family to live
in his hometown in Kangwŏn province. Just like Hyŏn, the character in “Before and After Liberation” (Haebang Chŏnhu, 1948), Yi “whiled away his time fishing,” waiting for liberation (Chŏng Hyŏn’gi, 1989).

In 1945, when Korea was liberated, Yi left Kangwŏn province and returned to Seoul. There he became involved with the rightists in the literary movement under, the auspices of the Committee for the Construction of Korean Literature (Chosŏn munhak kŏnsŏl ponbu) formed by Im Hwa and Kim Namchŏn which initially encompassed all literary activities in Korea--right and left. Yi continued to be involved in the literary scene in Seoul. He was involved in the leadership of the All Korea Literarians’ Conference in February of 1946 and then in June of 1946 went north. He became involved in the literary scene in P’yŏngyang and traveled to the Soviet Union as a representative of the Korean Culture Association (Chŏng Hyŏn’gi, 1989).

Yi T’aejun continued writing through the war. Then in 1955, as the Soviet Korean faction fell out of grace in the north, it is reported that Yi was criticized for being aligned with the Soviet faction and for his activities with the “group of nine” in the 30’s and was purged (Chŏng Hyŏn’gi, 1989).

The case of Yi T’aejun making what appeared to be an abrupt about-face politically, leading him eventually to North Korea, is an interesting one. Probably the best place to look for clues as to how this change took place is in Yi’s short story “Before and After Liberation” (Haebang chŏnhu, 1946). This story will be discussed in more detail in section 5.5. Here it will suffice to say that it provides useful information on the changes that took place in Yi T’aejun’s thinking and attitudes.
4.0 Stories.

4.1 Introduction.

The stories described in this section were selected because they all help relate the common themes found in the short fiction of the period. From the collaboration described in “Constable Maeng” to the self-criticism found in “Milestones” and “Before and After Liberation” and the return of overseas Koreans and loss of home described in “Fire”, each one illustrates to the reader those issues the post-liberation writers wanted to portray.

4.2 “Constable Maeng” (Maeng sunsa, 1946).

Because of the confusion of the liberation period and the uncertain future, many writers had a difficult time drawing conclusions about what lay ahead for Korea’s future. Writers turned to describing this confusion and contradiction rather than the new life or bright futures of the return of the promised land. They wrote of the chaos and the irrational and absurd times that had fallen on Korea (Kwŏn, 1989). Ch’ae Mansik had already proven himself a successful writer of satire in the 1930’s with “Muddy Currents” (T’angnyu, 1937) and Peace Under Heaven (T’aep’yŏng chŏnha, 1938). The genius of Ch’ae Mansik is skillfully displayed from the opening passage of “Constable Maeng” (Maeng Sunsa, 1946):

“Was constable Maeng a direct descendant of the great sage Mencius known to us as Maengja? No one seems to know. Nor was it known for sure how many generations separated the noted prime minister Maeng Kobul, from Korea, and the Chinese minister Maeng Chŏngsŏng” (Ch’ae, 1999 p. 145).

Ch’ae associates the main character, Constable Maeng, with the likes of Maeng-ja (Mencius) and the great Korean prime minister Maeng Ko-bul and the noted Chinese premier Maeng Chŏngsŏng. All three were known to contemporary middle-schoolers in Korea as great Confucian leaders and intellectuals of the past. Vague though the association might be, the reader is left with a sense of potential greatness of character and intellect with regard to Constable Maeng. Then, as if to snatch us back from this reverie, the very next line informs
us of the contradiction and absurdity of the association the author has made. Through the voice of Sŏbun, the character closest to Constable Maeng and his wife, we learn of his lack of intelligence and ambition:

"You’re such a bumbling fool that in your ten years of being a constable you’ve never once given me a silk dress. What do you have to say for yourself?" (Ch’ae, 1999 p. 145)?

The story goes on to describe a man with little talent and no ambition. With this ironic twist, the reader is unexpectedly taken from one end of the spectrum in their impression of the main character to the other. This is the same technique used for stylistic effect by the performers (Kwangdae) of Korean lyric song—P’ansori. Ch’ae Mansik’s use of this technique in “Constable Maeng” and elsewhere is taken as evidence of the influence of P’ansori on his writing style (Cho Tongil, 1982).

Another technique employed by Ch’ae Mansik which shows the influence of P’ansori in his writing is the mixing of Classical Chinese and vernacular Korean within the text. First a phrase is given in Chinese (Hanmun). This is followed by the very same paraphrase in Korean.

"But, what goes around comes around. I guess it’s true what they say, that all good things must come to an end. We had a good thing going and now it’s time to pay for it" (Ch’ae, 1999 p. 150).

Originally this technique was used as a method of teaching Chinese characters (Sim Chaegi, 1983). However, as Korean literature moved from being dominated by Classical Chinese into the era of the vernacular Korean novel in the eighteenth century, dialogic narrative or the mixing of the two languages became commonplace in Korean literature (Fouser, 1999).

Constable Maeng’s rationalization of his own uprightness is another device used by Ch’ae to show the contradictions of the liberation period. If constable Maeng had had the ability to become wealthy through the execution of his “duties,” he would have. Desire was
not the problem. The constable just didn’t have what it took. He does take on a small scale but to him such trifles ‘don’t count.’ Unable to cut himself a larger piece of the pie, he considers himself to be upright (Kim Sangsŏm, 1989):

“...constable Maeng felt pretty confident in his uprightness. It was no sin to accept a suit of clothes or a few won here or a hundred won there, or the rice or firewood or the groceries or the bottles of liquor. It was a common practice that anyone would have done. Therefore it counted neither as corruption nor as abuse of his position. Things like this counted as corruption or a crime only when they rose to the level of tens of thousands of won--hitting the jackpot and changing one’s lifestyle, as it were. Only then does it become an issue. Constable Maeng had never taken more than a hundred won at any one time. For that reason he considered himself upright” (Ch’ae, 1999 pp. 148-149).

The contradiction shown here in the constable’s “uprightness” echoes the contradictions present in the liberation period. It illustrates the contradiction inherent in the term liberation itself. The Japanese had been defeated by the Americans and Korea would now be rid of foreign powers. But then Korea was occupied by the Americans and once again Koreans were not in control of their country.

“Constable Maeng” is an interesting sketch of collaboration with the Japanese by Koreans. Kim Hyŏn’gu (1990) writes that owing to the exploitative nature of the colonial structure set up by the Japanese in Korea, the selfishness of the people was brought out and Koreans abused their fellow Koreans (p. 435). That Ch’ae Mansik chose the constables of colonial Korea to expose exploitation and collaboration is further evidence of his mastery as a storyteller with a purpose--to educate the people of Korea about the true nature of the situation Koreans found themselves in.

Collaboration was widespread in Korea especially during the closing years of Japanese rule. Cooperation with Japanese officials reached into all levels of Korean society--from Koreans who were active in government on a national level down to village headmen who filled the Japanese quotas by sending young men and women off to ‘serve’ the Japanese
(Cumings, 1997). There were also high ranking Koreans in the Japanese Imperial Army, there were business leaders who benefited from their collaboration with the Japanese, and so on. It would have been difficult to emerge from that era wholly untainted by collaboration in some way (Cumings, 1997).

Though these examples of collaboration may not have been widely known to the Korean population, they must have been suspected. But to the average Korean on the street the one symbol that stood out as an, if not the, embodiment of collaboration with the Japanese was the constable. It was the constables whom everyone knew were employed by the Japanese. It was the constables that Koreans saw or came into contact with on a daily basis. The constables were not only skilled in executing their official duties, but were also known to be skilled in their unofficial duties:

“He was treated to countless rounds of drinks. And not to be missed were rice, firewood, meat, fish, liquor, and the like. They all flowed in. There was no shortage at home and he was also invited out a lot” (Ch’ae, 1999 p. 148).

As just illustrated here in the story, the level of corruption of these “keepers of the peace” ranged from the meagre efforts of Constable Maeng to supplement his income to the vast fortunes amassed by some of his colleagues:

“Mr. Kinoshita and his family moved back from Yŏju and now he’s rolling in dough. They have two Injang-brand sewing machines, a bunch of furniture and his wife’s clothes fill fifteen trunks. Now that he’s back in Seoul do you think he feels guilty? He bought a grinding mill and now he’s making good money and living the easy life” (Ch’ae, 1999 p. 147).

Yi Uyong (1993) points out that because constables received so much, the term “constable” came to mean ”a well-blessed person” during the colonial period (p. 122). This fact is also spelled out in “Mr Pang” (Misūt’ō Pang, 1946) another story by Ch’ae Mansik, and is hinted at in “Before and after Liberation” (Haebang chŏnhu, 1946) by Yi T’aejun. Ch’ae asserts that these constables were driven to be more stern in the execution of their “duties” by their wives. Yi Uyong (1993) goes on to say that these wives came to be associated with the
constable’s “duties”. A statement of the level of corruption that had been reached in these harsh times and how Koreans turned on each other is seen in none other than the constable’s wife, Sŏbun. Even after liberation when Constable Maeng is out of work, Sŏbun clings to the memories of her life under the previous system and again takes up her pestering for a new dress:

“His life as a constable had become like a dream to him. But here is this simple woman with her one-track mind again. She clung to her lost opportunities even to the point of death. Why, only just this morning she starts up her bitching about the silk dress and the constable’s bumbling nature” (Ch’ae, 1999 p. 146).

To Sŏbun there was nothing wrong with the way her husband supplemented his pay by taking bribes. In fact, she expected it. Even though the Americans had replaced the Japanese, Sŏbun felt things would go on just as they had always been. Further evidence of this can be seen in Sŏbun’s continued references to the constable’s colleagues, who were almost certainly Koreans, given their Japanese names (Kanemoto for “Kim” and Kinoshita for “Pak”). During the last few years of colonial rule Koreans were forced to give up their Korean names in favor of Japanese names and after liberation this policy of Koreans assuming Japanese names was done away with. It is evident that some in Korea had become drunk with the power afforded them under Japanese rule. It is also clear that those who benefited from the Japanese system wanted to hang onto it.

When the Americans landed in September of 1945 and occupied the southern half of the Korean peninsula they initially left in place the bureaucratic structure of the Japanese. To the dismay of Koreans, the Americans also kept 70,000 Japanese administrators and public servants. Thus, “Constable Maeng” (Maeng Sunsa, 1946) is also a bitter jab at the United States Military Government for mishandling the occupation of Korea and criticizes the Americans’ lack of sensitivity to the Korean people. To keep the Japanese system intact, a system that had long been a thorn in the sides of Koreans, was a great insult (Yi Uyong, 1993).

The satirical twist that Ch’ae Mansik puts on the ‘righteousness’ of Constable Maeng
is the author’s attempt at explaining how common Koreans were sucked into collaborating with the Japanese. Constable Maeng considers the small pickings he gets to be no crime or sin. In fact he believes anyone faced with the opportunity to take bribes would do the same. What was so bad? Ridiculous though it may seem that anyone could absolve himself of guilt through this feeble rationalization, Ch’ae Mansik is speaking for those Koreans who in some way cooperated with the Japanese and now, after liberation, wanted to make amends for what they had done.

The main character in “Constable Maeng” can be seen as a type for Korea in general. If we look at the situation of the constable’s life, it mirrors the Korean situation. Before liberation Constable Maeng relied on the reputation and strength of his fellow constables to acquire what he got through bribery. Of course he was able to live more comfortably, but he himself wasn’t in keeping with the reputation of constables. Maeng was ineffectual and relied on the strength of others. With liberation Constable Maeng’s life was shaken up and he was out of work. He goes back to the only thing he knows but ends up ultimately quitting the force with the realization that things aren’t what he expected.

By comparison, Korea before liberation was also ineffectual. It couldn’t free itself from Japanese domination and relied on the strength of the Allies to accomplish this. After liberation, the future of Korea would surely be in the hands of Koreans. But contrary to expectation this was not the case. And so Koreans found themselves in what seemed a hopeless situation.

“Constable Maeng” (Maeng Sunsa, 1946) can be considered a sketch of the awakening sense of guilt within those who had thrown in with the Japanese. The convicted murderer Kang Pongse arrives at the police station decked out in the uniform of a police officer. Constable Maeng is appalled that someone like this could be a police officer. Fearing for his life, he resigns from the force. Upon returning home and discussing the incident with his wife, Constable Maeng comes to a realization and declares:

“Come to think of it, was there ever really a difference between constables and murderers? All we ever did was extort goods and kill innocent people. Yep, being
a constable or a murderer is one and the same” (Ch’ae, 1999 p. 152).

With liberation and the social situation that arose thereafter, many Koreans found themselves coming to a similar realization. A realization of the fictitious nature of liberation—a liberation in which they weren’t really liberated and the national police were no different from the murdering robbers they had been during the colonial period (Kwŏn, 1989 p. 124).

4.3 “Milestones” (Tojŏng, 1946).

“Milestones” tells the story of Sŏkjæ, a man who had been arrested during the colonial period for his involvement in the communist movement, but had then been released on account of illness. Fearing reprisals, he had done nothing for the movement for six years after being released, out of a sense of self-preservation. Throughout the story we witness the stream of consciousness experienced by Sŏkjæ as he comes to different stages or “milestones” in his life and tries to release the feelings of guilt he has for his inaction (Im Chinyŏng, 1990).

In the beginning of the story we meet up with Sŏkjæ as he is embarking on a trip. After evacuating his family to his wife’s home in the country, Sŏkjæ is headed to visit a friend near Seoul. At the train station he is sitting waiting to buy his ticket when he is thrust into a reverie about some of the events of his past. His mind is drawn to an episode when he had met an old friend from the movement and the two of them had gone drinking. “Milestones” is a story of self-criticism and in the conversation between Sŏkjæ and his friend Kich’ŏl we see a continuous attitude of self-loathing on the part of Sŏkjæ. Sŏkjæ is a communist and recognizes in his own character numerous weaknesses that run counter to the ideal communist nature. Even though his friend Kich’ŏl had given up the leftist cause and turned to the capitalist venture of mining, the criticism vented in the bar is for himself and not Kich’ŏl. Kich’ŏl tries to make Sŏkjæ feel better about himself but to no avail:

“No, I have never done anything for anybody even once. I’m a stingy old miser, you know! A low-life. The bastard son of a filthy no-good peddler. You know if someone like you takes just one bath, you can live happily in the past or future. But
not me. I just heap upon myself all the filth and muck the world has to offer and can neither hide nor run in the present because I’m a loser” (My translation, see section 7.2)!

Next Sŏkjæ is confronted with the news of Japan’s defeat and we see him caught between the certain elation he must feel for the liberation of his country and the pangs of guilt for selfishly forsaking the cause. In this part of the story we get a sense that Sŏkjæ should be more excited at this great news but his excitement is subdued on account of his feelings of guilt (Yi Uyong, 1993):

“Then he headed toward the station. He was still seemingly unexcited by this news of liberation, but the slight trembling in his legs was a bit strange” (My translation, see section 7.2).

The next scene or milestone in the story illustrates Sŏkjæ’s reaction to the news of the forming of the communist party as he is visiting the young man Kim.

“...when he returned he couldn’t help being taken aback at another news flash—the communist party had been formed.

“I’ll be damned...One of the high cadres is Kich’ŏl!”

Sŏkjæ was tangled up in this problem of the communist party from inside and out and there was no way out of it” (My translation, see section 8.2).

We learn that Sŏkjæ had been a supporter of and believer in the communist cause for a long time. He saw it as the only source of truth. It was this knowledge of the truth and the recognition of his own faults and shortcomings that had caused him so much unhappiness and grief all these years. As he is lying on a hill next to the Han river thinking, the spectre of the communist party comes tormenting him again and we learn first-hand the source of Sŏkjæ's mental anguish:

“He knew that he had been troubled by this spectre for some time and it even angered him. It was a frightening spectre. Sometimes it exhibited a stubborn cruelty and at other times it was hard to tell it from a living, breathing thing. But even when he would close his eyes and give in to it he could not free himself from this spectre.
Yet this spectre held the one brilliant truth and he believed in its correctness—‘The party is correct’. He knew it was correct—this one universal correct truth—but he also knew it was bad—this truth with its vague ethical misgivings that had been a giant source of anguish for him all along” (My translation, see section 8.2).

But the forming of this party was troubling to Sŏkjae in another way. He goes on to criticize people like his friend Kich’ŏl for their premature actions and mistrusts their motives and leadership (Yi Uyong, 1993):

“So had these people actually formed the party?”

He had no way of knowing the answer to this, either. Suddenly Kich’ŏl appeared before his eyes. He was strong and confident-looking. He was a person who had endeavored to get money when money was the most powerful thing, and was willing to use every trick in the book to gather power when power was needed. No matter what society they might be thrown into, this kind of person would always be happy. But there was a secret. The secret was that the closer a person comes to fame and glory the more wicked he also becomes. Generally speaking, if on the surface a person is faithful, there’s little chance of him having a conscience. It goes to say that the more impressive a person is on the exterior the more corrupt he is on the interior.

‘When you bathe don’t you have to prepare the water and soap? Where did they get the means to form the party?’

Again a different cluster of people appeared before his eyes. People who up to this point had pretended to agonize in their own pathetic way within the confines of their own consciences. They were of the same ilk as Sŏkjae. This was even harder for Sŏkjae to accept. He didn’t want to think that it was the most filthy thing in the whole world. But it was repulsively petty. It made him sick and he couldn’t bear to witness it. Anyway, they all deserved to be flogged.

“So these guys actually got together and formed the party? Unbelievable!”, he thought” (My translation, see section 7.2).

Immediately following liberation a group of leftists who had been active in the Korean
The communist movement during the Japanese era met together at the Chang'an Building in Seoul and formed a party. They were led by Yi Yong and on Aug. 16th, 1945, one day after liberation, they organized a party that took in all the factions that had been feuding during the Japanese era (Suh, 1967). The fact that they included everyone along with the fact that there were prominent communist figures who were still in hiding or overseas and could not get to Seoul yet, led some to criticize the hasty forming of the party (Yi Uyong, 1993).

Sŏkjae’s reaction upon learning of the party as well as Sŏkjae’s cool treatment of Kich’ŏl when the two meet later in the story is in fact Chi Hayŏn’s criticism of the Chang’an Faction’s hasty forming of the party (Yi Uyong, 1993). Kich’ŏl tries to justify the actions of this group in his conversation with Sŏkjae but to no avail:

“To Sŏkjae it seemed like nothing but bullshit. Strangely enough, this talk of ‘comrades’ pissed him off. What a strange thing to say. People that until yesterday had been from different political camps and persuasions were today all using this one word. When he saw them all, arm in arm, claiming to be first-rate communists, their ignorance of the nuances of this word was one thing, but more than that, he couldn’t find it in him to praise the gall of these guys who suddenly went around using this word. Now they latch onto this word that they had abandoned for ten or twenty years and throw it around like it was some cure-all for society’s ills. Of course, he had some friends he could call ‘comrade’, but the comrades these people were talking about were of a different ilk. Once he had heard this ten times or so he tuned right out and felt less and less inclined to sit there and listen anymore” (My translation, see section 7.2).

Sŏkjae is not satisfied with the actions of these people in forming the party. As we see from the story Sŏkjae is equally dissatisfied with himself. The criticism of himself and others does not end. Sŏkjae then reaches the final milestone portrayed in the story. He is offered a leadership of position in the party but adamantly refuses. Having refused he merely takes the perfunctory steps necessary to join the party by writing his name and address on the membership form. He stops short when it comes time to write his “class” affiliation, and
briefly ponders his situation before finally writing “Petit Bourgeois.” Though no one would consider him a petit bourgeois, Sŏkjæ knows his true self and at this moment of confession he feels relieved, like a “weight had been lifted and his mind was lightened.” With this Sŏkjæ heads off to the front line of the leftist movement in the industrial area of YŏngdŭngP’o to begin the battle to free himself once and for all of his nemesis—the petit bourgeois in him. With the future prospects alluded to in the wide open boulevard opening up to him he felt like he could not get there soon enough.

“I must fight the petit bourgeois in me in my own way! The day the fight ends I will die and be born again... Now I go to YŏngdŭngP’o. Yes. If this place is going to be my grave, then it will also be my birthplace” (My translation, see section 8.2).

4.4 “Fire” (Pul, 1946).

“Fire” is a multi-faceted story set on the fifteenth day of the first month by the lunar calendar. An Hoenam has skillfully woven the motif of fire throughout all aspects of the story and the symbolism it provides is interesting. Sin Sujŏng (1996) writes that there is a three-fold meaning to fire in the story. First is the fire used by the people of Korea on Taebŏrum—the first full moon of the lunar year, when various superstitions and traditions were traditionally performed. Second, through Mr. Lee burning his home, he and all Koreans are ridding themselves of their feudalistic past. And third, when An Hoenam sees Mr. Lee burning his house it awakens him and all intellectuals. These three meanings of fire serve to destroy old life and start afresh. It destroys the old society and is the start of a new one (p. 610).

In this tale we learn of many of the traditions and superstitions associated with the first full moon of the year. One of the traditions described in the story is fireplay. The villagers would go out to the fields and hills and set fire to the grass. This traditional activity was seen as a game and fun activity for all but it also served to “kill harmful insects and the ashes it produced fertilized the soil. It was hoped this would make the crops grow better in the spring” (My translation, see section 7.3).
In this story we also learn of the life of Mr. Lee, a neighbor of the narrator, An Hoenam. “Fire” is really the tale of the return to Korea of this neighbor who was conscripted by the Japanese to work and fight on Truk island in the Pacific. We learn of the tragedy that has befallen Mr. Lee and his family as a result of his being taken away to work for the Japanese. While he is gone from home his father and son die and his wife runs off with another man. The people of the village had many opinions as to why these things had happened to his family,

“...maybe if Mr. Lee’s mother had not left his wife alone, she wouldn’t have run away; Mr. Lee’s wife couldn’t be blamed for running away after it was thought her husband had died and his mother had gone to live with her own daughter; If Mr. Lee’s son hadn’t died his wife would have stayed with her family; If Mr. Lee had just written a few letters none of this would have happened; His wife couldn’t come back because there was nothing here for her, etc., etc” (My translation, see section 7.3).

An Hoenam wants to learn more of Mr. Lee and especially how Mr. Lee feels about all these things that have happened to him. So on the occasion of the Taebom festival, An invites Mr. Lee over for lunch. They eat and chat and we learn in vivid detail the horrors Mr. Lee experienced on Truk island working for the Japanese. An then invites Mr. Lee out to see the fireplay. Here we begin to learn the significance that fire had played in the life of Mr. Lee and we get a foreshadowing of the role it would come to play in his life. Mr. Lee tells An Hoenam:

“...When I see fire spreading playfully across the fields, it looks alive. I was depressed when I first got home, but this relieves me some” (My translation, see section 7.3).

From this we learn that Mr. Lee’s concept of fire is quite different from other people’s. He has a deeper appreciation for the destructive power of fire than ordinary people:

“...when I went with him to the fields to see the fire up close, he seemed to harbor a sort of passion and affection for it.” (My translation, see section 7.3).

Mr. Lee tells An Hoenam of the terrible fire fight that took place when the American navy
bombarded Truk island, and later says:

“Compared to the fires on Truk, this is no fire at all” (My translation, see section 7.3).

After burning the field the two men go to Mr. Lee’s house. An Hoenam is about to make his farewell when Mr. Lee starts bringing out all of his belongings and smashing them in a pile in the courtyard. He then proceeds to light them on fire. An Hoenam, believing the drinking has made him distraught and that he doesn’t know what he is doing, stops him. Later in the night after An Hoenam has gone home, he is tormented by the spectre of fire and has trouble sleeping out of fear that his own home will burn down. Then late in the night he is awakened to find a fire has broken out in the village. It is Mr. Lee’s home burning.

Mr. Lee didn’t burn his house because he was distraught or because he was drunk. He had learned plenty about fire while he was away from Korea. He knew from his experience with fire that it was the only thing that could rid himself of the encumbrances and past hardships of his life. An Hoenam goes on to say:

“He told me, ‘Even after the war ended, I remained on the island for many months with nothing to eat. I truly thought I could have died on the island in the fires, or at the hands of the Japanese. I could have thrown myself into the ocean, taking my own life. But coming home wasn’t really living again. I wanted everything to be just like it was when I left, but I had to make a new start. I left my mother in my brother-in-law’s care..... Now, after all this time, my parents, my wife and son, and my whole household are gone. I am going to seek out a new life and a new world..... When I was dragged off to Truk, I was weighted down with many worries, but not now, not any more. Don’t you worry about me. It’s just like you said, Mr. An—now that Korea has been liberated, my future will be brighter. I’m off to find it...’” (My translation, see section 7.3).

With this, Mr. Lee is off to find his bright future. This sentiment was widespread in Korea after liberation as Koreans had not only their country back but their lives. They were now free to choose their own course.
“Fire” is not just a story about Mr. Lee determining to seek a better future. An says:

“It was obvious he thought being favored to live through the ordeal on Truk had not been for himself so much as for others. He felt shame that all of his efforts had been on behalf of the detestable Japanese. He determined that with the same degree of shame he experienced, he would devote his life to working for Korea” (My translation, see section 7.3).

With this An Hoenam is speaking for many Koreans who found themselves working on behalf of the Japanese during the war (colonial period). It was a fact that many Koreans did help the Japanese war effort, by choice or not (Cumings, 1982). They could choose to work or choose to be jailed or even killed. Mr. Lee, feeling badly for this, determined to make amends in the future:

“Instead of continuing to be unhappy, it was evident that the destruction of his old life had allowed him to start anew” (My translation, see section 7.3).

In “Fire”, An Hoenam is also trying to destroy his own petit bourgeois past in order to start anew (Kim Sunghwan, 1995). During the colonial period An had been aligned with the right-wing pure literature movement. He had even called KAPF a monster and denounced the left-wing proletarian literature movement (Kwŏn, 1989). As the narrator considers what Mr. Lee had done by removing his past with fire, he is embarrassed at the life of leisure and privilege that he had clung to and says:

“I determined that, in future, to become a more prominent novelist, I must help people of the same new type as Mr. Lee--people who are seeking a new life” (My translation, see section 7.3).

After liberation An Hoenam shed his old skin and redirected his life to the leftist movement (Kwŏn, 1989).

4.5 “Before and After Liberation” (Haebang chŏnhu, 1946).

“Before and After Liberation” begins two years before the Japanese surrender in 1945 and ends several months after liberation. It tells the story of a writer named Hyŏn and his
transformation. This autobiographical tale mirrors the life of Yi T’aegun during the same span of time. Chŏng Hyŏng’gi (1989) writes that “Before and After Liberation” is an important short story for studying and understanding the life of Yi T’aegun. In 1943, Yi left Seoul for a small village in Kangwŏn province, renouncing his life and ceasing his writing activities. “Before and after Liberation” chronicles the process Yi went through; moving from political apathy and passivity to a gradual awakening to activism on behalf of the Korean people, and then to support of the leftist cause.

The story starts by describing the attitudes and activities of Hyŏn, who is referred to as a “two-bit novelist.” Hyŏn is portrayed as some sort of activist from his involvement with local youths and further evidence of this could be taken from the quote from ‘his latest book:

“Living submerged under this one ideology is like having one’s soul immersed under water. It’s said that there’ll be a violent revolution. It will be very abrupt—beyond human control. There is no way it will be gradual” (My translation, See section 7.4).

We learn that Hyŏn had been implicated by his association with these youths and was regularly called in to the police station for questioning. Yi illustrates the mental anguish Hyŏn and his family were living under from this harassment by the police:

“He had been called to appear at the station the next morning, but wanted to go right now and get it over with. That evening he couldn’t do anything. He had no appetite, and being a bit on the timid side, fidgeted so much he couldn’t sleep” (My translation, See section 7.4).

Added to this worry was the fact that Hyŏn had given up writing rather than write in Japanese or collaborate, and for a time had been without an income with which to support his family. In the character of Hyŏn we sense a defiant attitude toward the Japanese. At this time in Korea—1943— the Japanese had banned the use of the Korean language, and at a writers’ conference Hyŏn had been the only person to speak in Korean. To make amends for this act of defiance, he is ordered to translate the “Pacific War Journal,” but a further defiance is seen:
“Ever since we have been old enough to remember, all we’ve had is forty years of shame. To us there were no pleasures of love, no glory of youth, and no honor in art. Maybe if they asked me to write a diary of Japan’s defeat in the war I might agree. But why should I write something beneficial to Japan” (My translation, See section 7.4)?

However in the next line we learn more of the true nature of Hyŏn and his defiance:

“Hyŏn really wanted to live; more than that, he wanted to survive” (My translation, See section 7.4).

Yi T’aejun goes on to relate the steps Hyŏn takes to “survive.” After enduring this harassment by the police for some time Hyŏn acts on his wife’s advice and moves his family to the country. Hyŏn’s motivation for choosing the locale he does is based on the fact that he has connections to a local doctor and feels he can escape not only the close scrutiny of the police in Seoul, but conscription as well. Food was also purported to be in abundant supply in the area, and Hyŏn could spend his time fishing in a nearby river.

The story goes on to relate that none of these conditions turned out to be as Hyŏn had expected. The country doctor is off in Seoul and the local magistrate is as stern as ever; Hyŏn cannot feel assured that he will not be drafted. It is quite a distance to the river, and the road goes right past the police station. So Hyŏn has made no escape at all. Hyŏn strikes up a friendship with an old scholar gentleman named Kim Chigwŏn and the two of them spend their time together speculating about Japan’s demise and commiserating about Korea’s situation under Japanese rule.

We see in the actions of Hyŏn during his time in the countryside that, though he opposed the Japanese, he was not above doing what was necessary to survive. Hyŏn was “invited” to attend a writers’ conference in Seoul and was slated to deliver a speech. But Hyŏn did not readily agree to attend. When he is finally persuaded, after three telegrams requesting his attendance, he ends up taking the watch of a local constable with him for repairs. His attendance at the conference and his willingness to help the constable earn him increased esteem in the eyes of the local police chief and constables, as well as the local
magistrate. From this time forward they leave him alone and let him go about his fishing. Yi writes that Hyŏn was passive during this period, fearing reprisals from the authorities. Hyŏn did not like the Japanese regime and their oppressive policies toward the Korean people, but he was happy to sit back, not taking an active role in the struggle against the Japanese, in order to save himself.

This passiveness from fear, combined with Hyŏn’s cooperation with the Japanese, are precisely what Yi T'aejun is criticizing about his own actions during the colonial period (Kwon, 1989). As mentioned in section 2.2, “Before and After Liberation” is a story of self-criticism. But the criticism Yi renders of Hyŏn’s activities during the colonial period is not the same self-loathing criticism we see in “Milestones” (1946) by Chi Hayŏn, and as such seems more genuine. Chŏng Hyŏn’gi (1989) states that “Before and After Liberation” is more a criticism of Hyŏn’s continued passivity out of self-preservation even after liberation. Kwon (1989) notes that one of the important points of the story is Hyŏn’s hesitation after liberation. When Hyŏn arrives in Seoul after liberation, he seems to have been awakened by the fact that even though Korea had been liberated nothing had changed; the Japanese were still in place. And when the Americans came, they ignored the expectations of the people and were lenient toward the Japanese, even retaining some of them to aid in the American administration. From this time, Hyŏn felt the need to participate in efforts to free Korea from the fetters and bonds of colonialism still gripping the country, but did not wholeheartedly join the leftist movement.

As mentioned in section 1.7, immediately following liberation the Center for the Construction of Korean Literature (Han’guk munhak kŏnsŏl ponbu) was formed by people who had been leftists under colonial rule. Soon after its formation, the Center for the Construction of Korean Literature joined with other arts groups to form the blanket organization the Association for the Construction of Korean Culture (Han’guk munhwa kŏnsŏl hyŏbŭihoe). This association is the Munhyŏp referred to in the story and from early on was labeled a leftist organization. However, this organization initially included writers and artists from all political persuasions in Korea. Chŏng Hyŏn’gi (1989) writes that Yi
T’aejun got involved with the Munhyŏp immediately following liberation in the organization’s right-wing literature division. In “Before and After Liberation” we see the trouble Hyŏn suffered on account of Munhyŏp’s stigma as a leftist organization:

“This was something he had experienced on more than one occasion since the time of the division that had become clear between people that were inclined to be politically conservative and those inclined to be politically progressive. Friends who before liberation wouldn’t have hesitated in the slightest to help him out of any trouble would, at just one or two words, become totally different people. A distance would come between them and they would keep each other at arm’s length suddenly. Several times, a growing sense of distance was interjected between him and his friends like this” (My translation, see section 7.4).

This passage shows the pressures that were placed on people after liberation. There was a political polarization in Korea and individuals were forced to choose one camp or the other, foreshadowing the national division that was to come in Korea. Hyŏn ended up siding with the left-wing, but still at this point in the story is not in full support of their activities. This is evidenced by his stopping the overzealous show of support for a communist demonstration by members of the Munhyŏp.

At the end of the story Hyŏn’s elderly friend from the countryside, Kim Chigungŏn, came to see him in Seoul. Kim supports the return of the provisional government to Korea and their assumption of power. Kim felt that because the leaders of the provisional government had been fighting overseas for the Korean people, they had the right to govern the country. Indeed, it was the moral obligation of the Korean people to accept them. Kim had expressed his desire for the restoration of the Yi dynasty monarchy and a return to Korea’s glorious past. But Hyŏn, though he respected the sacrifices the leaders of the provisional government had made, felt no sense of obligation to these leaders. To Hyŏn, those who had stayed in Korea, carrying on the fight and suffering and dying were more worthy of respect than those who had lived outside of Korea for years. Hyŏn also felt that Kim’s desired restoration of the Yi dynasty would not benefit the Korean people. Because of
Hyon’s attitude, Kim thought he had become a communist.

The story ends with the poignant scene of Hyŏn and Kim parting ways. Kim refuses Hyŏn’s offer to treat him to lunch and resolutely leaves “without looking back.” Hyŏn goes up onto the roof of the building to watch him go. We get a feeling that with this, Hyŏn is letting go of his own past. Early in the story Hyŏn is described as a conservative gentleman, just like Kim Chigwŏn. But at the end of the story, we see that Hyŏn has broken from his conservative past—a past that always glorified history and looked back in time for truth.

As Hyŏn watches Kim go, he is reminded of the late Ching Chinese scholar Wang Guo-Wei, whom he had once heard give a lecture in Japan. Wang’s message was of reverence for the past and a longing for the restoration of the Ching empire. Wang traveled throughout East Asia seeking this past glory, but everywhere he went, the past glory had been swept away, and in the end, he committed suicide. We cannot help but think that Yi T’aejun had also come to feel that looking to a restoration of the Yi dynasty would amount to suicide for the Korean people. Yi T’aejun’s works up to this point had carried a sense of classicism with them, and expressed a longing for the glories of bygone eras (Kim Yunsik, 1997). But here, in “Before and After Liberation”, Yi lets go of his classicism, represented by Kim Chigwŏn. Yi is now breaking the mold and looking to the future for truth.
5.0 Conclusions.

With the bonds of Japanese imperialism suddenly broken on the fifteenth of August, 1945, Korea was thrust into a period of unprecedented freedom and confusion. Thirty-six years of Japanese domination had provided inspiration to the writers of Korea. And it has been said that with Japan out of Korea, Korea’s writers were left to founder, with no direction in their writing. In this thesis I have shown that rather than foundering, Korea’s short fiction writers found numerous social issues and conditions to write about.

It was the purpose of this thesis to translate four works of short fiction from the liberation period. Because of the ban described above, no works of writers who went north have been translated into English before. Three of the four short stories translated for this thesis fit this category. Namely: “Fire” by An Hoenam, “Milestones” by Chi Hayŏn, and “Before and After Liberation” by Yi T’aejun. The translations alone contribute greatly to the Korean studies field and it is hoped will aid in further scholarship on the liberation period outside Korea. I have also described the formation of right- and left-wing literary organizations and the renewed national literature debate that sprang up in post-liberation Korea. I have also introduced An Hoenam, Ch’ae Mansik, Chi Hayŏn and Yi T’aejun, whose works were selected for translation for this thesis. And lastly, I identified the major themes found in the short fiction from the liberation period and have shed light on the events of the liberation period that had bearing these themes.

There was a “self-criticism” movement among writers immediately following liberation and this trend is well illustrated in “Milestones” by Chi Hayŏn and “Before and After Liberation” by Yi T’aejun. With liberation, thousands of Koreans who had left the country for various reasons streamed back to Korea. The bright dreams of the Korean people as well as the realization that things weren’t any different are reflected in “Constable Maeng” and “A Take of Two Rice Paddies” both by Ch’ae Mansik. The trouble Korean farmers experienced before and after liberation is reflected well in “The Ritual at the Well” and “Chŏm-nye” both by Ch’oe Chŏnhui, and in “A Tale of two Rice Paddies” by Ch’ae Mansik. Collaboration is addressed in “Constable Maeng,” and an under-tone of anti-Japanism is present in all of the stories.
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Appendix

7.0 Translations

7.1 “Constable Maeng” by Ch’ae Mansik.

Was constable Maeng a direct descendant of the great sage Mencius known to us as Maengja? No one seems to know. Nor was it known for sure how many generations separated the noted prime minister Maeng Kobul, from Korea, and the Chinese minister Maeng Chǒngsǒng.

“You’re such a bumbling fool that in your ten years of being a constable you’ve never once given me a silk dress. What do you have to say for yourself?”

It used to be that the wives of constables had three distinguishing characteristics. To wit: they were cunning, they looked down on others and they dressed lavishly. In fact, it was on account of the vanity of women like this that constables were all the more stubborn and stern in the execution of their “duties”. Sŏbun was the wife of constable Maeng and we can say with certainty that her eloquence and brains (or should we say conceit) took a back seat to no one. But only when it came to clothing was she unable to hold her head high. She became the wife of this “great” constable but what a shame it was that she couldn’t dress extravagantly. It was indeed a pity the way she lamented this fact.

But as the wife of the constable, Sŏbun’s purported lack of confidence with respect to extravagant dressing surely wasn’t because she herself was faulty or incompetent. The fact was, during the eight years her husband was a constable (she had exaggerated when she told him ten), never once had he provided her a silk dress. You see, the constable wasn’t too savvy and had no talent for obtaining the goods they needed.

Immediately following liberation, constable Maeng found himself out of a job. His life as a constable had become like a dream to him. But here is this simple woman with her one-track mind again. She clung to her lost opportunities even to the point of death. Why, only just this morning she starts up her bitching about the silk dress and the constable’s
“Suppose I gave you a bunch of clothes. What would you do with them? You put them on and you take them off. Is there more to it than that? I can’t figure you women out.”

The constable said this rather softly.

Exactly to the contrary, Sobun replied in a loud, bitchy voice:

“Whadda ya mean, put ‘em on and take ‘em off? When have you ever given me anything anyway? Where are all these clothes you’re talking about?”

“Oh, I’m not saying you, in particular, have a lot of clothes. I’m talking about women in general.”

“You are such a jerk. Even if you had a mouth as big as a wicker basket there’s nothing you could say for yourself. It’s no use. No matter what I say you don’t get it. You’re a fool! A Bum! A moron!”

“You mean you don’t like your good-for-nothing husband?”

“Is there anything good about you?”

“Well, should we split up?”

“Oh, Puhlease!”

“So!”

“I’m so sick and tired.”

“Well whatever—I’m gonna sign up to be a constable again.”

“What’s a man good for if his wife doesn’t have clothes to go out in?”

“All right. When I’m a constable again I’ll get you that silk dress and a black camel hair overcoat and a satin jacket and a platinum watch to go with it...”

“Oh no you won’t. Not a two-bit constable like you. Maybe a constable with a lot more smarts than you’ve got. Anyway, I’ve given up on the silk dress. I’d settle for a plain one.”

“Ha! Don’t you remember that song, ‘We’re so poor, but we have each other and a little bit to eat, and that’s all right by me?’”

“Yes, I remember...but so what?...we’ve never even had a few pennies to spare. How am I supposed to run this household on nothing? Day after tomorrow we’ll be out of rice and
With that, constable Maeng stubbed out his after-dinner smoke, eased himself up and prepared to go out. A light autumn rain had begun.

This year Sŏbun was twenty-five and in the prime of her youth. At seventeen she had wed constable Maeng, who was then thirty. The constable had lost his first wife the year before.

Sŏbun was as tall and slender as her tongue was sharp. She was a high-maintenance sort of woman, and the knowledge that she was her husband’s second wife, with all that this entailed, made it seem worthwhile for her play on his affections by pestering him terribly and behaving badly. Constable Maeng spoiled her by indulging her behavior. He was 38 and his wife, 13 years younger, was like a daughter to him. This made him all the more infatuated with her. Daughter or wife, it didn’t matter; his infatuation blinded him to her faults, which he thought were simply adorable.

Constable Maeng would soon be forty. A person who turns forty has seen it all. The rough edges get rounded off and begin to mellow. Besides this softening brought on by age, constable Maeng was naturally of an easy-going disposition. Most things wouldn’t get him riled. He never forced his opinion on anyone, nor was he overly stubborn. It was against his nature, and besides, he considered such behavior distasteful and unnecessary. Rare, indeed, were the times he argued or feuded with others. To put it nicely, he was sort of an easy-going fellow. But, in fact, there were those who called him dim-witted and foolish--who said he lacked ambition and talent.

Realizing the kind of man he was, she knew that no matter how poorly she comported herself, no matter how harshly she pestered him, he would seldom stand up to her or fight back. Try as she might to pick a fight, all he would ever do was respond with the same gentle voice.

As he eased himself up and gazed out at the rain falling in the yard he drove the point home to his wife:
"It’s a good thing I’m an upright man. You’ve heard about the others, haven’t you? Some were beaten to death, some had their houses burned down, and some had their arms and legs broken."

But to Sobun these were empty words—the same old lame excuses.

"Hmph! Mr. Kanemoto got promoted to inspector even though he’s as crooked as they come."

"How long do you think that will last?"

"Well, if that’s the way you see things, then you must be smug. Mr. Kinoshita and his family moved back from Yŏju and now he’s rolling in dough. They have two Injang-brand sewing machines, a bunch of furniture and his wife’s clothes fill fifteen trunks. Now that he’s back in Seoul do you think he feels guilty? He bought a grinding mill and now he’s making good money and living the easy life. Nobody was killed, nobody got their limbs broken. You’re wrong!"

"The things people do... Well, isn’t it all just thievery?"

"So, even when your tummy is rumbling with hunger, you’re gonna keep yapping about being upright?"

"You betcha. No matter how poor you are, as long as you’re upright, you’ve nothing to fear."

Finally, constable Maeng made his way over to the wardrobe. His face twitched at the sight of it. Back when he had been a jail guard, there had been a furniture maker imprisoned there. Sobun had pestered constable Maeng to pass on a slip of paper to the furniture maker. The constable put up a feeble show of resistance to the idea but ended up presenting the note to the prisoner. When a wardrobe arrived at his door two days later constable Maeng asked no questions.

The hemp uniform hanging in the wardrobe caused the face of this upright constable to prickle even more than the wardrobe itself. The suit had been custom-made early last fall at a tailor’s across from the police station—the tailor about which there were some nasty rumors flying around. The suit bore a price of 32 won and some change. When the constable
went to pick it up he had only 3 won in his wallet. Reaching for his wallet, he asked, "How much is it?" The owner said "Don't mention it" and ushered him out the door in possession of the suit.

The wardrobe and the suit were just one example. During his eight years of making the rounds as a constable there had been a three year period when he supplemented his meagre salary through bribery. Thirty won here, 100 won there. He couldn't refuse--this was how he rationalized it to himself. And far be it for him to know how much he had collected over the years. Apart from what people volunteered, when he was lacking something he'd go looking for a likely victim and say something like, "I'll pay you back soon--can you lend me just 100 won?" Here was a frequent source of spending money.

He was treated to countless rounds of drinks. And not to be missed were rice, firewood, meat, fish, liquor, and the like. They all flowed in. There was no shortage at home and he was also invited out a lot. Even though the constable's wife repeatedly complained that he never gave her anything, he had in fact procured fabric for her several times. But for some strange reason when it came to the silk dress, he just couldn't produce. And then the liberation of August 15th caught him by surprise.

Small though these incidents were, they still constituted bribery. Even so, constable Maeng felt pretty confident in his uprightness. It was no sin to accept a suit of clothes or a few won here or a hundred won there, or the rice or firewood or the groceries or the bottles of liquor. It was a common practice that anyone would have done. Therefore it counted neither as corruption nor as abuse of his position. Things like this counted as corruption or a crime only when they rose to the level of tens of thousands of won--hitting the jackpot and changing one's life-style, as it were. Only then does it become an issue. Constable Maeng had never taken more than a hundred won at any one time. For that reason he considered himself upright.

But look at the people he worked with--nine out of ten raked in conspicuous sums and were in "fat city". Some bought ten thousand won homes, some bought productive farmland in Yangju, and some retired as shareholders in trading companies.
‘If only I could get that kind of a chance...If only a chance to get a house came my way... Constable Maeng was always looking with anxiety for his big chance. But for some reason, opportunity never visited him. So he ended up out of a job in his “upright” way, with nothing but small-time pickings to show for it.

It is true he had desired and expected a bigger piece of the pie, but that wasn’t the problem. To constable Maeng’s way of thinking uprightness went something like this: ‘Since I wasn’t a big player, and I didn’t become rich, I am upright’.

His umbrella fending off the drizzle, constable Maeng headed off for the police academy at military headquarters. The application and resume that he had prepared and been carting around were tucked into the breast of his coat.

Immediately following liberation constable Maeng felt that he could be clubbed at any time or stabbed with a cold steel blade while going down a dark alley. To protect himself from such people constable Maeng hung up his sword and retired. But now that he was without a job, he had to face these perplexing problems day after day. Even if not for what his wife had just said, he also sensed they were scraping the bottom of the barrel and it was unclear to him how they would buy rice and firewood.

It seemed that the world was full of money and that there were plenty of jobs and an abundance of goods. But no other kind of work presented itself to our constable Maeng who had never known anything else.

‘Since that’s the only kind of thievery I know, what can I do? Tsk, times are different now. What’s a guy to do?’

So in the end, he reluctantly reached the decision to give in and go back to being a constable again.

The cap, uniform and sabre were the same as before. And now with the addition of an armband, constable Maeng was a new constable of liberated Korea. He walked to a police box on east Chong-no. With his eight years’ experience and a simple test to prove his qualifications, he was appointed on the spot and assigned to a police station. As he was finishing his shift on the second day he was reassigned to another branch station. This was
his destination now.

Although constable Maeng was decked out as he always had been, for some unknown reason he felt no sense of dignity or excitement in his work. The people he met showed none of the caution of old and barely gave him a second glance as they went by. Some passersby actually dared to glare at him with animosity and disdain.

Now that constables didn’t willfully arrest anyone or make threats and, of course, since they weren’t allowed to rough anyone up, he couldn’t fathom why people didn’t feel more at ease or more comfortable around constables.

He walked along absorbed in thought:

‘Maybe we acted terribly in the past...’

That must be the reason.

‘I guess we did treat innocent people badly and wrongly accused many.’

‘So now if people are rude, there’s not much I can do.’

‘But, what goes around comes around. I guess it’s true what they say, that all good things must come to an end. We had a good thing going and now it’s time to pay for it.’

Unconsciously, he sighed.

Finally he arrived at the police box. And there he discovered another reason why people despised constables.

The junior officer suddenly awakened, his head jerking up from the table at the sound of Maeng’s clumping footsteps. Seeing this, constable Maeng, from habit, yelled,

“Hey....sleeping on the job?” Maeng looked the junior officer up and down.

It was Noma. Constable Maeng wouldn’t have recognized him if it weren’t for the red spot on his face.

Noma, the tenant’s son.

Until this year, when he had moved to his current house in Hongp’a-dong, constable Maeng had lived for six years in Sachig-dong. Noma’s family had lived in the same house since the time of the previous owner. At that time Noma, with the red spot on the left side of his face, was twelve. He attended a neighborhood school but never took it seriously and
dropped out after a year. He would hang out in front of the Umi Theater carrying advertising banners and handing out flyers for movies. And when Noma came home he was often whipped by his parents.

Once Noma was a little older he joined the Umi cinema gang and would roam around the streets at night making trouble. Constable Maeng had even gotten him released several times when he was brought in for some offense.

Noma looked a bit embarrassed but, on the other hand, was also sort of smiling because he was glad to see constable Maeng.

"Hard to imagine isn’t it, Sir? I look forward to working with you, sir."

"Since when do colleagues go around calling each other sir?"

It must have been age that made him say this and constable Maeng laughed with Noma without showing what he was really thinking.

But silently he told himself:

‘If that kind of a guy can be a constable then it serves us right to be scorned.’

It annoyed constable Maeng that he would have to do all the reports and paperwork for Noma because he was so ignorant. But on the other hand he figured he could send Noma out patrolling and on personal errands, and he could kick back and take it easy...

After about a week of constable Maeng treating Noma as a manservant, constable Maeng was feeling rather at ease. But then constable Noma got transferred to a different police box and was expecting the newly recruited replacement.

‘I wonder who it’ll be? I sure had it good when Noma was here.’

Constable Maeng was sitting reading the newspaper and thinking thoughts like these when he heard the distinctive rattle of a sabre at the door.

“Top of the morning to you!”

In marched a burly brute of a man.

Constable Maeng looked up, gasped and nearly fell over. All of his hair stood on end and at once a cold sweat trickled down his back.

The new replacement recognized constable Maeng even better and with an evil grin
on his face said,

“Well, well, well, I’ve got you right where I want you!”

Constable Maeng was speechless.

“What’s the matter, cat got your tongue? You gonna sit there and blink or are you
gonna say hello? You’ve at least got to greet a police officer of the new Korea.”

“Uh, hi.”

“So, still plugging away as a constable, huh?”

It was Kang Pongse... the convicted murderer and robber, previously sentenced to
life... Kang Pongse.

The year before last when constable Maeng had been a guard at a holding cell, Kang
Pongse had been brought in for robbery and murder. Constable Maeng had guarded him for
half a year or so. This is how they had become so well acquainted.

Once Kang had made a scene about some cigarettes and in the process caused a big
ruckus. Because of this the day-shift guard didn’t feed him his lunch and dinner. That night
when constable Maeng came on shift, Kang Pongse pestered him continuously for dinner and
then went off on the constable gnashing his teeth and cursing,

“You wait and see—if I escape the death penalty and get off with a life sentence, and
ever make it out of here alive, I’ll slice you wide open. Who’s gonna stop me from running
you through?”

It was that very same murdering robber, Kang Pongse.

So to constable Maeng it seemed as if any second his colleague, Kang, would
yell,“Hey, sucker!”, pull out a long knife and stab him in the guts. Constable Maeng was
scared to death the whole day. He couldn’t wait for his shift to end. Those few hours seemed
like practically an eternity.

After arriving home breathless that afternoon, constable Maeng bundled up his
uniform, his cap and his sword and wrote his letter of resignation.

“Resigning so soon?” Sŏbun started in on him.

“You have no idea. You should be thankful that you’re not a widow”, he said, to
which Sō bun had no reply.

"I thought only dissidents and political prisoners were supposed to be released. But they’ve gone and let all the dangerous felons and murderers loose too. Is that bloody-minded or what? It’s no wonder they lost the war with that kind of thinking!"

“A murdering robber was let out?”

“It’s not just that he got out--he marched right in.”

“Whadda ya mean?”

“To the branch station...with a sword and a uniform and hat.”

“An imposter, right?”

“Are you kidding? He was a constable all right. He even had a letter of appointment and all. And a proud graduate of the academy.”

“No way! You mean now we have to watch ourselves around constables, too?”

“Come to think of it, was there ever really a difference between constables and murderers? All we ever did was extort goods and kill innocent people. Yep, being a constable or a murderer is one and the same.”
Holding his breath, Sŏkjae entered the station and promptly looked at the clock. There were still about thirty minutes left until noon. He had come to the station two hours early and had nothing to do as the train was slated to leave at 2:50.

Considering the throng of people that had waited all night to get on the train, he hadn't come all that early. He had come running hoping to save five or ten minutes, since he not only wanted to get a ticket beforehand but he also thought he would be late for the train. Still, he was surprised at how early he was.

Feeling self-conscious from the collective gaze of all the people and also feeling the effects of the heat, Sŏkjae went outside. He plopped down on an old bench under an acacia tree and all at once the heat started glowing in him and sweat ran off him in torrents, making soft thuds as it dripped on the ground.

He wiped his face with a towel, but it was no use. And having discarded that option as he tried sitting there quietly, he grew frustrated. Then out of the blue it felt as if he should stand up and walk around. Somehow he felt terribly downtrodden and he couldn't help but wrestle it out with the fearsome heat in this indecisive manner. The nape of his neck tingled and the palms of his hands and balls of his feet stung. Before long he recovered his breath and since being an hour early was bad enough, when he thought about misjudging the time by nearly three hours, it was pitiful and funny.

But all things considered, he had more than one plausible reason for being early. First, coming to this area because of the “evacuation” had been the source of all his troubles. Besides this being his first time, when trying to get around in the countryside it was naturally easy to lose one’s bearings. One person had said it was a full fifty li, another had said it was seventy li, and still another had told him it was almost a hundred li to his destination. In the best of circumstances he would have been able to take his time and he wouldn't have had to come this early.

As he sat pondering the distance, he suddenly imagined himself as nothing more than
a county clerk, Whereupon he made the association with his father-in-law, the retired magistrate, and then felt all the more uneasy. If he was going to be a county clerk, it would have been nice if he had at least looked like one, but as it was he looked a sorry excuse for a county clerk. His satchel was old and because it didn’t make that sound new leather makes when brushed by something, it gave the feeling of being more of a bundle wrapped in cloth. This was the same satchel he had carried through university. He stuck out his chest purposefully, wagged his arms somewhat haughtily, and thought in a jocular way, “Don’t they know that this briefcase carried secret papers when I was at university and Seoul was my second home?” But when his thoughts reached this point, his mood for that day was ruined, too. The fact that he had been released from prison six years ago on account of illness was no excuse. It seemed he had been living all this while quiet and lame even though he was alive. He sensed a certain unknown aversion for himself, but more than this, he felt as if he had lived these long six years as a waste to the human race.

It was then that Kang first appeared in his mind. Then Kich’ol, too. Then thoughts of the night he and Kich’ol had been drinking. It was the time he had gotten pleasantly drunk. Anyway, since Sökjae had been lonely and by himself for some time then, he was pleased to meet this old friend. Indeed, he wasn’t at all displeased to see Kich’ol, even though he had returned with wads of money he said he’d gotten from mining. Sökjae was still more than happy to see him, whether Kich’ol had been mining or not. So happy was he to see Kich’ol, he felt like letting loose. And so Kich’ol, who unlike others had no skill in expressing his emotions, had smugly pronounced, almost as if boasting or harboring some sneaky intention:

“Since when have you ever welcomed a tramp like me?... You must have been really lonely.” He offered Sökjae a drink.

At any rate the phrase ‘You must have been really lonely’ had been how he really felt and it was the truth besides. In fact, from the time he had met up with Kang, he had been overwhelmed by huge regrets with each passing day and an unspeakable loneliness had enveloped him.

“That’s right, I’ve been very lonely.”
Kich’ŏl’s words seemed to touch a nerve. He responded to Kich’ŏl in this manner at first but then, for some reason or other, just as he was going to look back at him, his mood started to develop in a perverse direction. Finally he got hold of himself and began to criticize Kich’ŏl. Kich’ŏl listened for a while but was unable to take it any longer.

“What are you bitching at me for?”

Said Kich’ŏl, laughing, and then went on:

“Let’s see now! Since when are you holding some official post that you can accuse me now of being a traitor? Have you gone and tried to make your way in the world of investment like me? Just ‘cause someone sells booze by the side of the road, does that mean they’re a scumbag? Anyway you’ve haven’t lived in such a despicable way, so why don’t you just take it easy?”

Kich’ŏl had interrupted him like this. But when the conversation reached this point, Sŏkjæ couldn’t figure how he had been ‘bitching’, whether it was drunken talk or not. Naturally Sŏkjæ couldn’t help being confused.

“No, that’s not what I meant at all. You just don’t know me very well. You’re simply a better person than me. Yeah, that’s it—a better person. You don’t know me, OK? The eye that’s deep in the corner of my heart sees me better than anyone else can. And it’s an eye that’s especially good at seeing my vices....”

His first reaction was to ward off his friend in this incoherent way, but when he realized what he was saying and stopped short, his eyes were bulging.

His friend burst out laughing, waving him off,

“Oh, shut up. The more I listen to you the more it feels like I’m lost in a dark forest.”

They both raised their glasses. From that point in their conversation Sŏkjæ gradually grew cold and distant. A flickering sense of regret and remorse was growing, peeking out over the rim of his glass. For no apparent reason Sŏkjæ felt remorseful and sinful. He was sad like a child.

“I have lived my life for so long just for myself. When I was in hiding and then in prison it was only for myself. During my twenties I wanted to establish myself as an
extraordinarily important person. When my thirties rolled around I wanted to set myself up as an utterly conscientious person with everybody's trust. But now I've dug my own hole and can't get out.”

He was drunk. His friend Kich’òl was also drunk and as he was off making passes at the barmaids, Sŏkjae kept on mumbling the same things even though no one was around to listen to him.

“Last January when Kang came, I lied to him telling him I was still fervent about the movement... But I was on my way to make a thousand won on a garlic deal... But when all was said and done I was afraid to get hooked up working with Kang again. That’s right... there was no way now that he could make a hero out of himself by publishing an article in the newspaper like the old days. Now if you got caught just once you would die and no one would know the difference. To the frivolous and vain it is a waste to sacrifice yourself like this...you know what I’m saying, pal?”

Sŏkjae yelled this. Just at the point in the conversation when he was felling sorry for unloading all these worries on his sick friend, Kang’s face of came to mind.

Kich’òl came over and Sŏkjae continued talking:

“I say for myself--I don’t care for whom or for what, but just once I hope to offer up my life and die for others without self-regard. Why... why was I born on this earth never once to do anything good for anyone?”

This was not merely the liquor talking. It was his true self.

“You’re drunk! What makes you think you haven’t done anything for anyone?”

Kich’òl tried to comfort his drunk friend, but Sŏkjae was all the more obstinate.

“No, I have never done anything for anybody even once. I’m a stingy old miser, you know! A low-life. The bastard son of a filthy no-good peddler. You know if someone like you takes just one bath, you can live happily in the past or future. But not me. I just heap upon myself all the filth and muck the world has to offer and can neither hide nor run in the present because I’m a loser!”

“Listen now, pal! How can you say that you and me are really any different? When it
comes to suffering the psychological abuses of this society, we are just the same... Anyway, you just have a weak disposition. You're just idealistic and want everything to be perfect and pure... that's your problem.”

Kich'öl laughed again.

Afterwards Sŏkjæ sometimes thought back their conversation that night. Surely it had been the booze talking. It was embarrassing when he thought it over. But when you are drunk you speak your true mind. You don’t lie.

These bitter insults didn’t always come from outside him. He was constantly finding fault with himself within the dark recesses of his mind. At long last he always ran headlong into “human nature”. Ultimately, when he arrived at this vague self-reproach of “I’m a bad person”, because this was a sort of moral thing, without any clear form or indictment, it was all the more difficult for him to deal with. This time, since he had escaped to the safety of his wife's house, he was constantly mulling over thoughts like, ‘You shameless louse, you only think about yourself and your family’. His wife had discerned what was troubling him and retorted, ‘Don’t worry about what others will think... it’s our house, so it’s all right’. After twenty days of being with his wife’s family and being chided like this he decided to leave. Since he was near Seoul, he thought he would go and visit his friend “Kim” who ran a ceramics factory in Yang-Dong, and was now headed on his way to Seoul.

The mountain road was lined down both sides with stately pines. As he walked along his mind went back to the student incident, and the image of a young and pure, intelligent-looking Kim kept coming to him.

Suddenly the road went down into and back out of a ravine. It wasn’t quite a “pass” but it reminded him of the steeper ridge ahead. Here and there the sound of squirrels occasionally scurrying up and down the pine trees drew his attention to the fact that the trees had been scored and cans for collecting pitch were hung on them. Because these trees were so majestic the image also brought with it an annoying feeling. Rather like the image of some grand thing being tortured. ‘If the pitch were blood that would really hurt.’ As his heart had become weak and vulnerable, he was easily affected at the slightest provocation and could
not help feeling a wistful sadness in this quiet mountain setting.

As he crossed over the “pass” he looked for a place to sit and rest for a spell. He had walked so far that his legs were hurting and he was out of breath. He lit up a cigarette and sat leisurely, staring blankly off into space. Suddenly he found himself quite at a loss. He looked and looked, but no matter how he looked at it, the sun appeared to have dropped a few more notches to the west. He hadn’t the faintest idea what he had been thinking about all this time, nor how far he had walked. It seemed he had only just left on his journey, but at the same time it seemed he had come a terribly long distance, taking his time. Though it bothered him, to him the problem was not that his father-in-law had reserved a ticket for him. The problem was not knowing for certain how far he still had to go to get to the station. So first and foremost he concluded that getting on to the station was the best course of action. He hurried back to his feet without bothering to put out his cigarette.

He had been sitting on the bench under the acacia tree for some time when all of a sudden his ears were rattled by an echoing radio message. It was the twelve o’clock news broadcast coming from the shipping office across the way.

Not only had he not heard a radio broadcast for nearly a month, but he hadn’t even had a good look at a newspaper. He really wanted to hear the “news” but since he couldn’t seem to rouse his tired, aching body, it wasn’t easy for him to get up and go listen. Just as he barely managed to get up out of his chair the news ended. But above all else he had to get up and find out about his train ticket.

He headed over to the front of the shipping office. Just as he was on his way inside to look for the guy his father-in-law had arranged his ticket with, it occurred to him that something strange was going on. There were far too many people there. The sheer number of people wasn’t the strange thing. The strange thing was all the people just sitting or standing around with oddly excited expressions on their faces. And the strangest thing of all was the two or three persons sitting with their elbows on the table and their heads wrapped in their arms not saying a word. Things being as they were, it occurred to him that it wasn’t the right
time to ask about the tickets.

For an instant he wasn’t sure what to do. Just then a boy emerged, big tears dripping down his cheeks. Sŏkjæ took a step back and, in the confusion of the moment, grabbed the boy. Held by his collar the boy shot a sideways glance at Sŏkjæ, freed himself with a quick jerk and took off the other way. Because Sŏkjæ knew the boy was simply excited and hadn’t taken offense, he followed after him. The next thing he knew the boy was sitting on the same bench all weepy.

“What’s the matter? Why are you so sad?”

The bright glint in the boy’s white eyes endeared the boy to Sŏkjæ and caused him to speak to the boy in an affectionate and friendly tone.

The boy answered back in a kind voice, not so much out of any sense of duty to reply, but as if to say that the boy felt he had cried enough.

“Emperor Hirohito has surrendered!” the boy said lifting his head.

“.....”

Sŏkjæ’s heart sank and everything went dark. Japan’s demise. Because this had been everyone’s fervent hope it may well have been at the forefront of everyone’s mind. “Who’d have thought it would come this fast?” At that moment it wasn’t so much coherent thoughts, but shadowy notions like these that were swirling in his mind spreading like rippling waves and then subsiding. Strangely, this only lasted a very brief instant, after which, curiously, his mind became peaceful. He harbored some vague doubts as to whether it could somehow be true or not. He was caught up in a chilly, overwhelming yet also captivating excitement.

“Now even Korea’s going to be independent. Governed-General Abe just said so!”

The hint of an almost unnatural smile played about the corner of the boy’s eyes as he spoke but he still didn’t show any great excitement over this extraordinary news. ‘He’s a Korean lad after all’, thought Sŏkjæ. Sŏkjæ was a little uneasy and sat there for a moment in a stupor. Then he felt strangely curious about the boy’s hidden inner emotions which he had just witnessed. Sŏkjæ’s lack of even a vague reply in any form whatsoever was due to his feeling it was not right to doubt the boy; so he just sat there saying nothing. Because of this
silence the boy seemed to be losing interest. For his part, Sŏkjae wondered how the boy could sit there so blandly, without a reaction to this momentous news. With an odd look on his face the boy looked up at Sŏkjae.

“Aren’t you happy?”

Sŏkjae thought the boy’s manner of asking was a bit annoying. The feeling that the boy seemed instantly five years older confused Sŏkjae.

“Why?... Why, of course I’m happy... Very happy... Aren’t you?”

“Of course I am!”

“Then why are you crying?”

Sŏkjae couldn’t help laughing.

The boy seemed confused and embarrassed. Lowering his head, he answered,

“I’m crying because of the way he said, ‘Myself, my fellow Japanese, and our subjects in all the colonies’... I just felt sorry for the emperor.”

“Emperor Hirohito took our country from us and persecuted us Koreans for forty years. ‘Felt sorry’ for him, what do you mean ‘felt sorry’?”

“Still, I feel sorry for him ‘cause he surrendered.”

“....”

The boy went on,

“His voice was so pitiful.”

Sŏkjae couldn’t think of anything to say. Because the boy’s tender heart was so exceedingly “humane” Sŏkjae was unable to force upon him the “adult truth” that detestable people should be treated detestably. Sŏkjae wondered to himself if it all wasn’t his own weakness. Perhaps revenge, indeed, was something for adults. He came to feel that this boy was pure and good, and therefore wasn’t able to distinguish that which was detestable.

“You are even greater than the Emperor.”

Sŏkjae mussed up the boy’s hair as he stood up. The lad, as if buoyed from the praise, also stood up.

“But at our company, Mr. Ch’oe, Mr. Kim, Mr. Kimura and Mr. Kawajima were all
overjoyed and raised their fists, yelling for joy”.

“Oh, there’s Mr. Kim now.”

The boy ran off toward the station.

“And those people are even greater than you...”

Sŏkjæe mumbled to himself in the direction of where the boy had just stood. Then he headed toward the station. He was still seemingly unexcited by this news of liberation, but the slight trembling in his legs was a bit strange. Kim was a shortish, stout-looking young man. Kim had been addressing the crowd, but it was unclear what he had said. Many people were just mumbling strange one-syllable words, or were just standing around, mouths hanging open, and odd looks on their faces. These were not so much expressions of tension as they were expressions of complete dumbfoundedness.

“From now on everything is ours. All of us are free--so be happy everybody!”

Kim was shouting this over and over, but the inside of the station was oddly quiet. At the appointed time they sold the tickets and even after Sŏkjæe had procured his ticket the people were still not saying much. Just like fools.

It was the third day since Sŏkjæe had come looking for this young man named Kim. For some odd reason, when Sŏkjæe awoke this morning the first thing that popped into his mind was the news of the communist party. He opened his eyes wide as thoughts of the communist party filled his very core. But he couldn’t understand what was going on in the world around him. An unknown fatigue overcame him and he closed his eyes again. Frightened, he sat up with a start. A little later he felt a profound emptiness from deep inside, as if his body was floating in the air.

“Am I corrupt?”

In truth he had picked up more than a few ailments after August 15th. He wasn’t sure but when he thought about it now they had probably all started that day under the acacia tree. But he had diagnosed them from the time he had met the boy named Kim.
That day as the train neared Seoul both the air outside and the feeling inside the train began to change. When he arrived at the station the streets were completely filled with people celebrating. A few people here, twenty people there. Some were standing in circles, whispering, while others, with their shirts off, wildly yelled 'Mansei'. His heart began to race along with the crowds and in the excitement of the moment he nearly joined in yelling 'Mansei'.

As he walked along the straight military road that led to Kimp'o, on the one hand he incoherently repeated over and over to himself things like liberation, freedom, and independence. On the other hand, he pictured in his mind the wretched Japanese refugees he had seen from the train. It was an awful sight. Women and children loaded onto uncovered freight cars. They had been riding for several days in the hot sun with nothing to eat. Their faces looked like hungry ghosts sketched with the coal smoke dust. The troops had thrown bread and biscuits onto the train and the Japanese had spread their arms dropping their babies. The tragedy of this war of aggression was one thing, but for the first he time realized that Japan had lost.

It was already quite late in the evening when Sŏkjae arrived at the young man’s house. It had been two months since they had corresponded but considering the good terms they had been on, it hardly seemed that the long intervening period would be a problem. So he hurried in and sure enough, the boy lit up and greeted him warmly.

“You’ve matured... You’ve really grown up!”

And when he realized how the boy had grown, Sŏkjae at once felt an infinitely deep emotion; his grasp weakened and then tightened again. The boy clenched Sŏkjae’s slender hand in his own two big hands and shook it many times. In the end the boy couldn’t muster up anything to say and just sobbed like a child. Sŏkjae deeply regretted having been away. He felt confused and was on the verge of tears himself. But then he realized they weren’t his own tears but were coming from the great emotion the young man had just experienced.

He couldn’t sleep that night. Something was bothering him. Of course it was nothing to cry over, but whatever the emotion should have been, why couldn’t he cry? How was it
that the emotion wouldn’t come to me? How long before it will come? When it comes, what form will it take?

The next day as he walked along the road, he mingled in with the crowds of shouting youths. Several hundred cars flying Korean flags streamed by on the streets of Seoul without break. He followed the crowds of people yelling ‘Mansei!’. But when he returned he couldn’t help being taken aback at another news flash—the communist party had been formed.

“I’ll be damned...One of the high cadres is Kich’ŏl!”

Sŏkjae was tangled up in this problem of the communist party from inside and out and there was no way out of it. But he sat there for a while asking himself, ‘Am I not corrupt?’

As he sat there pondering, he determined that his current course was wrong and that he had to get up and do something about it. He was just about to fold up his bed when the boy came in.

“Wanna go to Seoul with me?”

There was no way the boy could know what was on Sŏkjae’s mind. Up until this point, the boy had considered Sŏkjae a committed comrade and the two of them would always talk about future plans. At these times Sŏkjae would always say,

“Uh...yeah, sure. We musn’t let ourselves turn into opportunists sitting idly by doing nothing. Even if we commit errors due to a lack of forces, it is better to commit mistakes than do nothing at all!”

Then he added, “I’m staying home to rest another day.”

After finishing breakfast the boy left for Seoul. Sŏkjae lay there alone and started to doze again. This sleepiness was a new disease for him. The more he thought about things, the more confused he got, to the point of not being able to figure it out. Gradually his head would cloud up and finally he would start dozing.

“I think I’m turning into an idiot.”

He rushed outside. The village was spread out along the gently meandering Han river. There were low hills scattered here and there that looked like islands.
In no time at all he went and sat down in a wooded area next to the river. Through the distant fog he could see the mirage-like view of Seoul as well as the railway bridge flickering in and out of sight. He could also see the green trees at the Foreigners’ Cemetery as he sat near the flowing waters of the Han river.

For a moment he was not sure where to rest his gaze and the fuzzy blur in his eyes made his head sting. He closed his eyes. It burst into his head like a spectre—the communist party. He flung his eyes wide open. The next moment this spectre was whirling around in the sky, on the ground, and in the river. It was stuck fast like a persistent leech to his brain and he couldn’t shake it.

He knew that he had been troubled by this spectre for some time and it even angered him. It was a frightening spectre. Sometimes it exhibited a stubborn cruelty and at other times it was hard to tell it from a living, breathing thing. But even when he would close his eyes and give in to it he could not free himself from this spectre. Yet this spectre held the one brilliant truth and he believed in its correctness—‘The party is correct’. He knew it was correct--this one universal correct truth--but he also knew it was bad--this truth with its vague ethical misgivings that had been a giant source of anguish for him all along.

Bit by bit his clouded gaze settled back on the river, and as it did, thoughts of Kim, Lee, Pak, So and others floated randomly in his mind. They were all fighters that had been underground or had left the country. Now the phantom of new warriors whom he had never known appeared before his eyes. He felt suddenly lonely.

‘How could they possibly have all gotten back together?’

But if Kich’ol is now a high-ranking cadre, then at least a few of the more outstanding party members from earlier days must be in Seoul also.

‘So had these people actually formed the party?’

He had no way of knowing the answer to this, either. Suddenly Kich’ol appeared before his eyes. He was strong and confident-looking. He was a person who had endeavored to get money when money was the most powerful thing, and was willing to use every trick in the book to gathering power when power was needed. No matter what society they might be
thrown into, this kind of person would always be happy. But there was a secret. The secret was that the closer a person comes to fame and glory the more wicked he also becomes. Generally speaking, if on the surface a person is faithful, there’s little chance of him having a conscience. It goes to say that the more impressive a person is on the exterior the more corrupt he is on the interior.

‘When you bathe don’t you have to prepare the water and soap? Where did they get the means to form the party?’

Again a different cluster of people appeared before his eyes. People who up to this point had pretended to agonize in their own pathetic way within the confines of their own consciences. They were of the same ilk as Sŏkjae. This was even harder for Sŏkjae to accept. He didn’t want to think that it was the most filthy thing in the whole world. But it was repulsively petty. It made him sick and he couldn’t bear to witness it. Anyway, they all deserved to be flogged.

“So these guys actually got together and formed the party?” Unbelievable!”, he thought.

But in the next instant he realized his face was burning up. As Sŏkjae had been sitting there, dejected and lamenting that Kich’ŏl was a party leader, it made him realize, ‘If he can do it, so can I.’ Hadn’t this repressed feeling been concealed in his mind? Sŏkjae threw back his head, stretched out and looked up at the sky.

He woke up after a while to the boisterous sound of kids playing. But what was this sensation? He felt the sky pressing against his forehead. It was blue as a sapphire, it was truly wide and infinite. But it wasn’t the sky, it was an illusion of the river. He sat up excitedly with a yell.

He realized he had been sleeping on the hillside. The sun was setting and for some reason it felt just like fall to him. Again he yelled, but it was an extraordinarily loud voice with absolutely no meaning or substance. The words he muttered reverberated in empty space and fell back on the rims of his ears. Below him the kids were waving a flag, shouting ‘Mansei’ and playing. He felt all alone.
He stretched out on his stomach and grabbed a handful of grass. His heart was overwhelmed and he shed heart-wrenching tears. He thought, ‘I’m still young... I’m still young.’ He continued to mumble incoherently for a short time.

3

On the next day Sŏkjæ followed the boy out of the house rather early.

Sŏkjæ had come down the mountain yesterday when it was already fairly dark. When he returned the boy had already come back from Seoul and seemed to have been expecting him.

“Where have you been?”, Without giving Sŏkjæ a chance to answer the boy continued,

“They’ve already come back and something big has happened.”

At this point Sŏkjæ realized that he would have to leave his own world behind him. He had an obligation to show sincerity to this up-and-coming young comrade. He straightened his collar and sat down soberly across from him. The gist of the boy’s story was that on account of the evil intentions of the Japanese factory owners, all of the products were flooding onto the streets. At this moment, through the most destructive means and thinking only of their private interests, agitated workers as well as people in general had turned the industrial areas like Yongdŭng’ŏ into pandemonium. After hearing what the boy said, Sŏkjæ felt personally at a loss. Perhaps this was an unavoidable temporary phenomenon. There were numerous incidents like this and it might be said that they could well bring on a crisis on the part of the social reformists. But even if that were the case, he couldn’t just sit idly by doing nothing.

“Have you heard whether the party’s doing anything about it?”

“It would appear that there are a few young armchair enthusiasts doing their own thing. Since they have a tendency to idolize anybody who claims to be a worker they won’t have a clue about restoring order to the situation.”

“How are you involved in all this?”
“I’m involved with Choil textiles and the No. 123 Ironworks. It’s just horrible how the workers are taking down the machines. But they are taking the position that since extortion is all we got under imperial rule, it’s OK for us to take what we can get now!”

“That might work once the labor class has been victorious! But even when we’ve won looting and all is no way to act... Anyway, it’s serious stuff... But if we’re not careful with this kind of thing we might see the bourgeoisification of the labor class.”

The two of them laughed stupidly but in truth it wasn’t a laughing matter. No matter how you looked at it, the true labor class struggle began from this time forth. For the leaders to naively idolize workers or claim the need to embrace the workers’ economic interests, was nothing more than sucking up to the worker’s primitive demands. All it does is sacrifice the ability of these workers to fight in the first place.

“If we’re not careful it could severely compromise our future work.”

Of course their conversation didn’t go beyond this. Even if the boy hadn’t requested, Sŏkjæ decided that day that when it got light he would go check things out in Yŏngdŭng’ŏ. When they got to where the road split off to Sin’gilchung the boy said he would go on ahead to Seoul and they separated. There was something still eating at the corner of Sŏkjæ’s mind as he started walking in the direction of the No. 123 Ironworks. ‘So you’re going to the factory, huh? Gonna do something about those workers, eh?... Yeah sure, now that there’s no worry of being caught.’ Suppressing this rising confidence he would say to himself, ‘Of course I have to go.’ Because self-reflection is all about the future. Excessive self-reproach makes you lose your courage and if you lose your courage, you end up committing error upon error. He tried like this to bolster his courage with words that anyone could say. But in the end, whenever he reached these thoughts of bravery, from some corner of his mind he would be hit with the question, ‘What? Bravery? Don’t make me laugh.’ And he could only laugh along with it. Now it seemed that passersby were looking at him, but he put on a brave face as he walked, feigning the same unbending posture as before. ‘Yes, I’m a coward. But because the word bravery contains within it the notion of fear, overcoming fear is courage. If bravery is a word that came about from the process of overcoming fear, then doesn’t that lead
to the paradox that the person who is most afraid can also be the most courageous? All I have
to do now is overcome my fear. There are bound to be any number of frightening things to
come and I will have the courage to overcome my fears in the future.’ Babbling incoherently
over these things he turned into the No. 123 Ironworks.

Just as he was entering the front gate someone grabbed his arm.

“Aren’t you Mr. Kim?”

He looked up in surprise to find Mint’aek. Sŏkjae didn’t know him just from being
jailed together on account of the same incident--Mint’aek had always been a true friend.

“I’ll be damned!”

He repeated ‘I’ll be damned’ over and over and hugged him, a moment only
dumbfounded. Meeting Mint’aek brought tears of joy to his eyes.

The two of them went to a hill off to the side and sat down.

He was brought up to date on all sorts of news, starting with the fact that the party
had been formed on the basis of those bonafide communists who had remained in Korea all
this time and that Mint’aek was just in the process of informing Sŏkjae of all this by
telegram.

Even though he had been in denial that any of this could be possible, nonetheless
ninety percent of it he could have more or less predicted and therefore there was nothing to
be all that surprised about. Even still, he was dumbfounded.

“So..., ah..., I’ll be damned! The party, well... ah...”

It was pitiful how flustered he was. Then Mint’aek said,

“Yes, you’re right. There was no reason for the party to split. But now they’ve gone
and set it up and what can we do?”

A little later the two of them got on the tram from Shin’gilchung to Seoul. They were
on their way to the communist party.

They passed over the railroad bridge and went by Seoul Station. As they neared their
destination, Sŏkjae’s heart began to beat wildly as he recollected the time in his early youth
when he had first learned of the party. It had been truly frightening and awe-inspiring.
They got off the train and by the time they started up to the “Communist Party” office guarded by guys with wooden swords, the morning had already passed. Suddenly there were crowds of people swarming around him, hailing him as ‘Comrade Kim’ and reaching out to shake his hand. He blushed as sweat trickled down his back, and felt short of breath.

Overwhelmed, he felt flushed all over. It was just like in the past when he had been persecuted but had remained faithful. ‘They talk of the party. What gives them the right to talk of the party?’

Standing there with his chest all puffed out in pride, in the arms of a few of his friends who, like himself, had early on been taken under the spell of the party, he thought, ‘How is it that you can come out here to the Chang’an intersection and set up your own party?’ They can jump up and down all they want and no one’s going to arrest or kill them. He wanted to grab anyone or anything and shake it till his arms were tired, yelling and asking all kinds of questions like, ‘What is this world coming to?’ and ‘How is it possible to do all this stuff?’

He didn’t know what was what. He couldn’t tell right from wrong. For a moment he lost his power of judgement and was happy at the smiling faces and warm, outstretched arms.

When he passed down the corridor, turned into the room on the left and shook hands with Kich’ol, his whole body tingled. But his thoughts had gone dull.

“Why are you so late?”

“How could you be so late?”

After hearing these very same greetings five or six times, and when he felt like it had been ten or twenty times, only then did he seem to regain his composure. At the same time, from some corner of his mind, the sarcastic thought suddenly came to him, ‘So, what bus should I have taken to not be late?’

This was all nonsense. He repeatedly thought this in his confusion. From this time forward, evermore chilling thoughts came to him like dousings of cold water. He was in a fix.

Kich’ol pulled the slightly embarrassed Sŏkjae into the empty room next door.
Kich’öl, who knew him very well, began to give him a detailed explanation of the forming of the “party”.

“I don’t know how you’re going to feel but politics are different... For all I know you might say, ‘With the underground and overseas comrades gone I don’t know how you could just up and form the party.’ But there is work to be done and none of these comrades has shown up yet. What else could we have done? We must organize. This way we can set the groundwork. Isn’t this the right thing for us to do for those comrades?”

Kich’öl quit talking. His face showed no sign of remorse.

To Sŏkjae it seemed like nothing but bullshit. Strangely enough, this talk of “comrades” pissed him off. What a strange thing to say. People that until yesterday had been from different political camps and persuasions were today all using this one word. When he saw them all, arm in arm, claiming to be first-rate communists, their ignorance of the nuances of this word was one thing, but more than that, he couldn’t find it in him to praise the gall of these guys who suddenly went around using this word. Now they latch onto this word that they had abandoned for ten or twenty years and throw it around like it was some cure-all for society’s ills. Of course, he had some friends he could call ‘comrade’, but the comrades these people were talking about were of a different ilk. Once he had heard this ten times or so he tuned right out and felt less and less inclined to sit there and listen anymore.

“OK, I get it.”

Ultimately this was all he could say. Kich’öl’s words rang true enough but they also seemed completely ridiculous. It just seemed that some great impurity had intervened at a crucial juncture. But however this “party” had come about, it was still the party. Early on Sŏkjae had pledged loyalty in the name of the party. And since this party was still in its youth, he had to do his utmost to foster its growth. Even should the party commit errors, and even if he should die fighting for the party, he knew that he could not forsake it. Therefore it wasn’t his place to stubbornly criticize the party.

As he sat there, a feeling of mistrust and doubt about so-called humans like Kich’öl suddenly came creeping over him. Inadvertently, he averted his gaze from Kich’öl and the
thought of continuing the conversation worried him.

“You must be very busy—I’ll drop by tomorrow.”

Finally he made as if to get up, but Kich’ŏl hurriedly detained him.

“What are you saying? You can’t... If guys like you walk out like this, who’s going to do the work of the party?”

These words cut him to the quick. When he thought about it, he and Kich’ŏl had both passed many a shameful year in the meantime. Whether plotting murders or nighttime escapes they had both been in it to the death. And that wasn’t all. Now that Kich’ŏl was such an important figure in the party, criticizing him was tantamount to criticizing the party.

‘I’m damned if I do and I’m damned if I don’t. What should I do?’

A terrible feeling of self-loathing came over him. It disgusted him at this late juncture to suddenly take the moral high road and be so nitpicking with Kich’ŏl and the party. But when he got right down to it he just wasn’t a good person. After refusing up and down the position in the party they had left open for him, he took the first steps of joining the party.

He took the writing brush Kich’ŏl handed him and after first writing his name and address, he wrote down his profession. It was then time to write his “class” affiliation. But he couldn’t help hesitating for a moment over this one. He wasn’t a ‘fighter’ and he was even less of a ‘revolutionary’. ‘Communist’, ‘socialist’, ‘activist’--none of these titles fit him. Finally he wrote “Petit Bourgeois” and put the brush down. Then he hurried outside without thinking about what Kich’ŏl might say.

The refreshing breeze on the street cooled his flushed face. He started off quickly toward the streetcar stop. When he boarded the streetcar headed for Noryangjin there was something spinning around inside his mouth. The more he considered it, it was his having written “Petit Bourgeois” on the top of the form.

“Well.”

It seemed to be some sort of sub-consciously perverse revenge on himself--the party member who had been sentenced to six years in jail. What an interesting word. But right on target. No matter what manner of things he had said and done about himself in the past, he
had never had the courage to step up to the gallows and put his neck on the line like this. But now, in this final moment when he had wryly indicted himself, even under this barely believable indictment, he pleaded no contest. Then he realized a weight had been lifted and his mind was lightened. It was most pleasant.

But there was one more thing. It screamed back to life in the top of his heart. In the end he lost all sense and babbled mindlessly.

"I must fight the petit bourgeois in me in my own way! The day the fight ends I will die and be born again... Now I go to YongdungP'o. Yes. If this place is going to be my grave, then it will also be my birthplace."

Suddenly he felt that the streetcar was moving at a feverishly slow pace.

He stood there quietly, leaning against the railing as he headed down the wide open boulevard leading directly to YongdungP'o.
It was Taeborum, the fifteenth day of the first month by the lunar calendar, and the day Koreans traditionally spend eating special foods and participating in unique customs and traditions. I woke up early and went to my mother’s room; she handed me a chestnut to eat. She also gave me a cup of cold rice wine. As I drank it, the aroma of the cold wine wafted through the air and stimulated my senses.

Teeth are said to be one of the “five blessings of life.” It is believed that if you eat raw chestnuts, pinenuts, walnuts and other hard things on this day, it will make your teeth hard. As mother had put it, drinking the cold wine is supposed to protect us from hearing anything rough or crude and help make our ears keen. There is nothing like having only good words to hear. I really enjoy the feelings imparted by these old customs.

Drinking the instant I awoke relaxed me and made me a bit tipsy, especially on an empty stomach. Then, according to mother, since I was the man of the house, the first thing I had to do was go outside and open the gate. Then I was to fold my hands behind my back and make three trips around the yard coughing as I go. I agreed to do this.

To me, it seemed just like a little kids’ game and wasn’t exactly proper behavior for a grown-up. But it was a custom that gave my mother a feeling of well-being and made her happy. Though I know this respectful custom has vanished in many parts of Korea, it didn’t require any special effort on my part, so I performed it.

First I went out to the main gate, removed the cross-bar and opened it. Then I folded my hands neatly behind my back and, not really coughing but just sort of clearing my throat three times, I circled the back yard.

Just then, Mr. Lee’s mother, who lived on the hill across from our house, came for water from the well.

“What do you want? You’ve come to get water on a holiday morning like this?” Somewhat taken back, my mother had been looking out the window.

“What, you mean I can’t get water today?” asked Mr. Lee’s mother.
“This is terrible! Why couldn’t you come last night and fetch your water?” replied my mother.

Mr. Lee’s mother answered, “I was over at my daughter’s house until this morning so I couldn’t.”

My mother instructed me to fill our water jug first. But as I stood at the well with her looking on, I only pretended to fill our jug, and instead poured two or three dippers of water into Mr. Lee’s mother’s smaller water jug, filling it first. This was the only time I had ever disobeyed my mother.

By the time the morning had passed, the rumor that Mr. Lee’s mother had come to our well to fetch water had spread throughout the village. It was believed that the blessings we should have received were taken away by Mr. Lee’s household. In fact, when I had gone out earlier to open the main gate, I had heard a squeaking noise. Perhaps it was Mr. Lee’s mother trying the gate to see if it was open.

There was yet another of these blessing-stealing customs. It involved the old ladies of the village coming and secretly digging up soil from around our gate on the day before Taeborûm. It was believed that when you spread this soil into every nook and cranny of your home, the blessings of those who had trod on the soil would be transferred to your home. This custom and the incident at the well are superstitions in Korea that have come down to us from the earliest times.

So, I was not saddened by Mr. Lee’s mother’s conduct. Both my mother, who sought blessings on our behalf, and Mr. Lee’s mother, who coveted our blessings, were ladies bound by age-old traditions and superstitions. There is another custom performed on the morning of Teaborûm before the sun comes up, called “selling the heat.” When you meet someone on this morning you say “Buy my heat” to them. In so doing, you are giving all of the year’s ills and disasters to the other person.

In all my time living in this neighborhood, I had never met Mr. Lee. When I moved back here from Seoul, it had seemed he was off traveling. During the time I was living in Seoul, he returned home one day only to be conscripted into the Japanese Army and sent
overseas. It was rumored that he had gone off to the South Sea Islands, and nothing had been heard of him for four years. Five days ago, just as everyone was about to write him off for dead, he appeared again.

While he was away his household suffered many hardships and tragedies. His father died within a year after he left. His brother-in-law (who was considered a son by Mr. Lee's mother) was taken to work in a coal mine on Hokkaido with the Japanese Army. This is how Mr. Lee's mother, his wife and sister came to be "three widows" living together. But Mr. Lee did not return. When his brother-in-law had returned from Hokkaido last October, Mr. Lee's mother had moved in with her daughter. Mr. Lee's wife was now all alone and, having lost her only son to smallpox the previous year, she ran off.

Later it was learned where Mr. Lee's wife had gone. There was a widower living in the Sojongni area who had also been taken to Japan with the army. When he had returned, his wife had died. Mr. Lee's wife became this man's second wife.

On the second day after Mr. Lee returned, his mother went to tell the news to his wife. But Mr. Lee's wife just cried and cried. Two days later we heard she had disappeared with her new husband.

Many rumors were going around the village; maybe if Mr. Lee's mother had not left his wife alone, she wouldn't have run away; Mr. Lee's wife couldn't be blamed for running away after it was thought her husband had died and his mother had gone to live with her own daughter; If Mr. Lee's son hadn't died his wife would have stayed with her family; If Mr. Lee had just written a few letters none of this would have happened; His wife couldn't come back because there was nothing here for her, etc., etc.

But what did Mr. Lee think about all of this? I wanted to meet him just once. There was also some neighborly concern on my part, but I must confess that it was mainly curiosity as a writer. On the day he had returned home, I heard his wailing from far off as I sat in my room. For a while, the sound of mother and son wailing together could be heard. Soon after, a younger woman's voice could be heard joining in. It must have been his younger sister. How could this awful wailing be described on paper? I decided to visit them and started off
listlessly toward their house. I was soon reminded of the awful, gut-wrenching sound and turned back towards home. I did so because I had joked, laughing out loud, about the selling of the heat, saying, “Sure, I’ll buy it.” Compared with the selling of heat, these other blessing-stealing superstitions, like coming first to get water from our well and stealing soil from our gate, were nothing. More than sympathy toward them for their misfortunes, I felt pity on them for their dependence on such unrealistic and unscientific traditions and superstitions.

There are many other activities on Taeborūm besides these traditions. The story goes that during Shilla times, a certain king received a letter carried by a raven which read: “If you understand this message, two will die; if you don’t, one will die.” After receiving this letter, the king “understood” and had the Queen and her co-conspiring monk executed. Then, so as to return the favor, every year on the 15th of January, he made a special feast of honeyed rice for the raven. Supposedly, this is why many Koreans still eat honeyed rice on Taeborūm today, but it seems like the tradition hasn’t continued. We didn’t have honeyed rice in our house. Instead, for lunch, we would prepare Five Grain Rice and with it we would have meat, dried pollack, herring and roasted seaweed. No side dishes were left out: sesame seed sprouts, sliced dried pumpkin, fern, bellflower root, wild asters and radish stalks and leaves, to name but a few. Inviting smells lingered in our house the whole day long. Some people like to say that, whether at home or at the neighbors, you eat lunch nine times on this day.

I thought I would invite Mr. Lee over for lunch and when I informed my mother of this she said “What?” Mother didn’t approve of Mr. Lee’s mother’s actions and was quite leery of her. So I asked my wife to prepare lunch and gently stood up.

When I got to Mr. Lee’s house, it was empty. The first thing I saw was a couple piles of good quality yellow soil sitting at the foot of the pillars on either side of the gate. Perhaps it had come from the road construction site over the ridge from here. I slowly took a look around. Fresh soil had clearly been scattered around the clean-swept path, courtyard and unfloored area between the rooms. I was also surprised at the water jar that had been left on top of the stove in the empty kitchen. I thought of the things that had gone on this morning.
and couldn’t help laughing. Judging from appearances, there was no evidence that, from the
time Mr. Lee’s wife had run off, anybody had lived here until this morning. Proof of the
village rumors about Mr. Lee’s mother’s actions in coming unexpectedly this morning for a
jar of water was there on the stove. This must have been a major coup for them. Not only had
Mr. Lee’s mother come early to fetch water, but I had poured it for her myself! Suddenly I
couldn’t help wondering whether they would really be blessed or not.

All the pots in the kitchen had been removed and as for the dishes, not even a chip of
porcelain could be seen. Though the house was a three-room thatched roof cottage—two
bedrooms and a kitchen—it was really nothing more than a poor old shack on the verge of
collapse, and the walls were just pretending to stand. Once you walked through the gate, the
courtyard was no bigger than the palm of your hand, but the inside of the kitchen looked
wide and neat when viewed from the yard. It appeared as if the household trappings had been
removed to Mr. Lee’s sister’s house.

I walked to the unfloored area between the rooms and looked in. It was easy to see
into the rooms because the paper covering the sliding doors had been torn off—just bare
walls with nary a piece of newspaper plastered to them. The overpowering musty smell of
dirt pierced my nose. The house had been divided into two rooms. As I peered into the upper
room, I reckoned it must have been Mr. and Mrs. Lee’s bedroom. There were marks here and
there on the walls where the paper used to stick. There were two large pine boxes stacked one
on top of the other, and on top of them another smaller box that looked somewhat like a
kerosene container. Maybe this was one of those so-called “three-level wardrobes”. Although
it appeared everything else had been removed from the place, these boxes looked like they
had been freshly placed there.

I went and met Mr. Lee at his brother-in-law’s house. When I think about it, for the
past couple of days as I had walked the dike on my way to the market, Mr. Lee and I had
actually passed each other. He was the same man who had been eyeing me so closely. He
wore an old yellow Japanese Army surplus overcoat. The couple of times I saw him I took
him to be a black marketeer from Seoul coming to buy rice in the local farm villages. Now I
realized this man was none other than Mr. Lee. It was all so strange!

Originally he was a farmer, but when I first saw him, I thought he looked like a black marketeer, and now I was certain he was not a farmer. I realized being on Truk Island for so long had changed him from the farmer he used to be to what he was now. Truk Island is in the North Pacific and was the site of a fierce battle between the Japanese and American navies during the second World War. His face was no longer just a simple farmer’s face. It was intense and fierce-looking. Even after we had made our formal introduction, when we passed each other on the dike he would stare at me suspiciously. I later realized he wasn’t really looking at anything in particular, it was simply his manner.

He was only thirty-five years old, but looked well over forty. He had a grimy, dark-colored face and anyone could notice his protruding cheek bones. The heavy wrinkles on his forehead were singular enough to make anyone who saw them believe his tales of suffering.

“Life is a dream. I just can’t think...” he said.

The tone of his voice was not that of a Ch’ungch’ōng province farmer. He continued, “When I first landed at Pusan I fell to the ground, caressing it with my hands. What I had really missed was Korea’s water. Just a drink of water...”

When I heard this, he sounded like some great politician relating his tales of hardship and service overseas. People in Ch’ungch’ōng province put a “yu” sound at the end of their sentences, whereas people who put the standard “yo” sound at the end are said to have "drunk the water in the city”. Mr. Lee seemed to have drunk a lot of that water.

“To the bitter end, the Americans weren’t able to land on Truk or at Rabaul. So they had decided to use the A-bomb first on Truk. The Japanese Navy’s fourth fleet was on Truk, and eventually they had no choice but to surrender.” Mr. Lee went on like this and I could see he was not the farmer he seemed to be. What would a simple farmer know about the Japanese Navy’s fourth fleet? I was amazed.

What had the Japanese occupation of Truk been like? My knowledge of this was sketchy. According to what Mr. Lee said, the Japanese had deceived him and he had been
shipped off to Truk as soon as he left Korea. He was there for about four years. At first, he worked building the airstrip. Then he was forced to undergo training as a cadet in the defense unit. Of course he could not write any letters home and today it had been hinted that this was partly to blame for the tragedy that had befallen his family.

When Saipan, and then the Philippines fell to the Americans, food on Truk suddenly became quite scarce. They had just managed to survive on a ration of one potato a day. Later they caught and ate rats and lizards and whatever else they could find; some people even resorted to cannibalism. This had been the situation when the Japanese surrendered and the Americans took over.

The bombardment of Truk Island could not be described in any other way but as a sea of flames. Forty-eight men had gone to Truk from Yŏngi county but a mere seven returned. Of course, some got sick and died and others starved to death and some even went half crazy and hanged themselves. Most, however, were sacrificed by the Japanese in the air raids and bombardment from the warships. How shocking and frightful to even think of it. The war had been so terrible, and it was possible to judge from its victims how bad it really was. Mr. Lee went on: “This war that the Japanese had started, and their resistance to the bitter end, were my enemies. They were Korea’s enemies. They were the enemies of the whole western world. They were the enemies of all mankind. They were even the enemies of the Japanese people themselves.” He spoke in a strange, aroused tone when describing the victims of the war and when talking about the ‘war-mongering Japanese-bastards’. It was obvious he thought being favored to live through the ordeal on Truk had not been so much for himself as for others. He felt shame that all of his efforts had been on behalf of the detestable Japanese. He determined that with the same degree of shame he had experienced, he would devote his life to working for Korea.

Nuts to make your teeth hard, wine to make your ears keen, prayers of good fortune, selling the heat, honeyed rice, five-grain-rice, rice wrapped in seaweed, tasty side dishes... These were some of the traditions of Taeborum. Some other traditions included fireplay (where people go out to the hills and set fire to the dry grass), moon viewing, fire fights,
stomping on the bridge and kite flying. After our meal, I asked Mr. Lee if he would like to see the fireplay.

"Fireplay?" he answered, staring at me like I was an alien or something. His attitude implied, "What would someone like you really know about fire?" His conception of fire seemed quite different from others'. No, it wasn't even that—when I went with him to the fields to see the fire up close, he seemed to harbor a sort of passion and affection for it.

When we reached the fields, the fireplay had already begun. In recent years, reckless fires and poor management of the forests had left the mountains devoid of any trees whatsoever. There was nothing but grass. This was just perfect for fireplay. When you threw a match onto the tinder-dry grass, it would burst into flames in the blinking of an eye and spread in all directions. It was magnificent to see the white smoke rising from the flames burning on the ridge, in the fields, on the dike, in the paddies and everywhere.

"Wow,... when I see fire... When I see fire spreading playfully across the fields, it looks alive. I was depressed when I first got home, but this relieves me some." Mr. Lee went on in this way. He said that Korea was truly a lot colder than Truk. Then he unfastened his coat, something he had not done even at supper, drew a deep breath and hollered, 'woooeeee!'"

Because the fire had grown so large, there was no need to use our matches. It burned the dry sesame stalks and even got into the dead tree branches. It burned wherever it pleased. The fireplay was better this year than any I had seen before and I suspect it was on account of the recent liberation from Japan.

The fields were crowded and everywhere you looked people were making fires. The smoke from these fires filled the sky. Some children ran around, here setting fires and there putting them out. So as not to miss out, Mr. Lee made himself a torch and ran all over starting fires. He had been a little drunk when we came out to the fields, but now it was clearly the fire intoxicating him.

He came up to me and said, "Compared to the fires on Truk, this is no fire at all." He continued, telling me about a magnificent rainbow that he had witnessed in the sky when he
was in Pusan. He told me to try and imagine this figure dancing in the sky with the stars
sparkling overhead, and likened it to how the bombardment of Truk by ship and plane had lit
up the sky with flames. I had trouble imagining what he described as I gazed for a while at
the fires here, minuscule in comparison to those on Truk. Then I raised my head and looked
into the sky; it seemed like it was on fire. It looked almost sublime.

As dusk settled, people started to return home. Then the moon began to rise and we
sat and gazed at it. Everything seemed all the more dark and dismal with the burning
mountains and fields. Burning the fields was more than just a game. It served to kill harmful
insects, and the ashes it produced fertilized the soil. It was hoped this would make the crops
grow better in the spring.

We walked up the ridge and down the other side to Mr. Lee’s house. Suddenly he
called out: “Mr. An...” I could tell he was deep in thought. He went on about how once on
Truk during the blackouts, he wanted to purposely start a fire. He said he had vowed to set
the gasoline storage area on fire each time the Japs dragged him out and whipped him for the
smallest of things. But he never did. It was sad to see him recount this, like something hard to
swallow. Listening to him brought to mind a similar memory of when I had been forcibly
drafted by the Japanese last year and sent to work in a coal mine on the northern part of
Kyushu. The Korean conscripts were elated and would shout for joy whenever planes would
fly over and the air raid sirens went off. They cheered because they thought the planes could
help set them free. I heard from several of my friends that they had lit secretly stashed piles
of coal in hopes of sabotaging the blackouts.

As we came down the slope and I was about to make my farewell, Mr. Lee motioned
for me to wait, and shuffled into the upper room of his house. He then proceeded to carry out
the “three-level wardrobe” that I had spied through the window earlier in the day. He brought
the three boxes out one at a time and then many other household items and piled them all in
the yard, smashing them as he threw them. Next he lit the pile on fire and said something
about viewing the moon. It was the custom when viewing the moon to build a bonfire and
make torches. I could sense the depth of his sadness as he began to burn his house. No matter
the consequence, I had no choice but to stop him. I tried to console him by telling him he
could overcome his troubles and that, now that Korea had been liberated, his future would be
looking brighter. He broke down, sobbing, and I left him alone. I was very tired and returned
home.

As I mentioned earlier, we eat lunch as many as nine times on this day, and because
of the complaints about the food tasting the same, a separate evening meal is not usually
fixed. Therefore, my wife seemed to be relaxing more tonight than usual. She took off her
apron a bit earlier than normal and retired to the backyard to watch the rising moon. The full
moons on January 15 and July 15 are the biggest, brightest and most attractive and clear of
the year. It is said that the first person to see the moon will receive happiness and blessings.
But my wife wasn’t thinking this; she merely wanted to look up at the magnificent moon.

From the earliest times, every year on this night, feelings of deep gratitude are
renewed. As I sat and gazed at this moon that was again in front of me, all these poetic and
fantastic wonders and feelings came pouring back into my heart. I thought to myself, “What
is so special about this moon? Isn’t it just the same moon that is always floating in the sky?”
But indeed, there it was, rising in the east, in all its glory as if to say, “Behold me!” My wife
took a laundry pole and climbed the hill behind the house saying she was going to grab hold
of the moon.

It is believed that if the moon on this night is white, there will be plenty of rain and
the crops will be abundant in the coming year. However, if the moon is red, the year will be
dry and there will be a famine. The moon seemed red to me, but my wife insisted it was
white. If I am right we will have a famine. I thought about this for a bit then conceded to my
wife that it was indeed white. The moon must have seemed red to me because of the vigorous
fireplay earlier in the evening. Then my wife made two pathetic waist-deep bows to the moon
and, looking over at me, asked me to do the same. This is part of the custom of welcoming
the moon. I told her that I didn’t really want to and, instead of a full bow, I just sort of
nodded my head as if giving a silent prayer. I don’t mean to excuse my actions; this morning
when I had done as my mother asked me by folding my hands behind my back and coughing
three times as I circled the yard, I hadn’t done it earnestly—I had just gone through the motions to appease my superstitious and foolish mother. Now I was doing the same for my wife. Shortly thereafter, my mother returned home from stomping on the bridge. She said that when I opened the door it seemed like the bright moonlight had pushed it open.

I worried late into the night, overwhelmed with a strange obsession that our house would suddenly catch fire. Although I am a writer with a vivid imagination, this feeling was very real to me. Once while living in Seoul, a fire broke out and some ten homes were completely destroyed. Thinking of this and about the fire that had just blackened the ridge fueled my fear that our house might also burn down. I was suddenly struck with fear and my fear grew as the night deepened. I drank heavily to ease my fears and thought this would surely give me a heart attack. On account of living in Seoul for so long, I constantly worried over accidents and illness here at our country home. But this anxiety of our house burning down was completely new and unexpected to me. Spending the whole night fretting like this was quite distressing. I didn’t sleep a wink.

Of course, it was all because of the fireplay. While I was carrying on, running about lighting fires, it didn’t actually seem that I was setting them at all. Rather, it seemed the fires just sprang up of their own accord. This is what I imagined happening at our house. Fires springing up in the dry kindling under the wood pile, in the kitchen, on the roof, and in the eaves, below the pillars and next to the chimney. Fire breaking out everywhere. I was quite drunk and attempted to lie down several times. But as soon as I did, I would jump up, open the sliding door and look outside. When I peered out the door, I could see leaves and straw blowing about in the breeze. Once when I looked out I saw what appeared to be flames dancing in the shadows of the moonlight near the kitchen, with heavy smoke billowing up.

It was one or two AM on this sleepless night when someone suddenly yelled “Fire!” Alarmed, I noticed the window across from our bedroom glowing bright red. Instantly I was on my feet; I opened the door, and there it was. Fire, flames, fire, fire, fire...

But this fire wasn’t in our house. It was across the way from our house. And this wasn’t just any fire, it had been purposely set. There was no reason to believe this fire had
spontaneously broken out in an empty house. An empty house with no more than a pail of water in the kitchen and no inhabitants. I remembered Mr. Lee wanting to burn his house before I had stopped him. It looked like he had got his way in the end. I imagined him setting his house ablaze and then climbing the hill to watch it burn from a distance while the moon shone down on him.

When I looked out, the roof had started to burn. The frightening flames spread ever higher. The house was isolated and all the neighbors were exhausted from the day’s festivities. Therefore, no one had seen the fire in time to do much about it. Moreover, there wasn’t a well nearby. The three-room thatched roof house burned to the ground. As the neighbors looked on, dumbfounded, the fire passed the critical stage, like a dying man taking his last breath. The fire department didn’t even show up. Unlike other places, where there are usually crowds and it is hard to get up close to watch, hardly anyone was around. Seen from afar, the dark blue light appeared dreamlike. Several of the neighboring houses suffered damage to their roofs. This was seen as sort of a score-settling final act.

On the second day after the fire, I went to see the house. From a distance, I thought it looked like a manure pile. It was a black, crumbling down, untidy, yet enticing sight. The people in the village didn’t say much about the cause of the fire, even though they did engage in a lot of guessing. Neither the owner nor the relatives would speak of it. Things were said like, “So... that house was jinxed. Nobody would buy it.” People figured it was jinxed because Mr. Lee’s father and son had both died, his wife had run off, and his household was in ruins. Presently, Mr. Lee’s mother came by and dropped to the ground, stretched out, and began to wail loudly. “Oh, my...! Oh, dear...! Is this a dream or is it real? What sins could I have committed?... Oh, my...oh...Sangjŏn! Sangjŏn! Where have you gone? Where did your father go? Our lives should be better. If my son and his wife returned we could live a better life. Oh, no!”

Her daughter came along and tried to lift her up, but she refused and fell back to the ground. She continued wailing.

I saw Mr. Lee once more after that. He seemed sharper and more composed than
before. It was as if he had changed in an instant into another person. He said he was leaving his hometown for a faraway place. This time, though, it would be in Korea. He told me, “Even after the war ended, I remained on the island for many months with nothing to eat. I truly thought I could have died on the island in the fires, or at the hands of the Japanese. I could have thrown myself into the ocean, taking my own life. But coming home wasn’t really living again. I wanted everything to be just like it was when I left, but I had to make a new start. I left my mother in my brother-in-law’s care..... Now, after all this time, my parents, my wife and son, and my whole household are gone. I am going to seek out a new life and a new world..... When I was dragged off to Truk, I was weighted down with many worries, but not now, not any more. Don’t you worry about me. It’s just like you said, Mr. An—now that Korea has been liberated, my future will be brighter. I’m off to find it.....”

The first time he left home had been a sad affair. But this time his leaving had a spark of hope in it. I invited him to visit me if he ever came to Seoul. I wrote down the address of the Confederation of Chosôn Literarians in Seoul and gave it to him. I didn’t want to let him go.

I know that, by comparison, my family had been happier than Mr. Lee’s. I also know that no matter how faithfully I perform these unseemly rituals on Taeborûm it wouldn’t keep my house from burning down or not. Instead of being a coward like me and uselessly fretting about such things, he had burned his own house down without any attachment, destroying his nemesis in the process. Of course this hadn’t been his only option, but it did serve to illustrate the many differences between people and particularly the difference between his attitude and my own. Instead of continuing to be unhappy, it was evident that the destruction of his old life had allowed him to start anew. He was different from me, and hadn’t been as happy; but at least he had taken the lead and made a fresh start. When I think about it, I had good reason to believe everything he said. I determined that, in future, to become a more prominent novelist, I must help people of the same new type as Mr. Lee--people who are seeking a new life.
Since 'subpoena' sounds so heavyhanded they had changed the name to 'directive.' But whatever they called this little slip of paper that the local constables had arrogantly dropped at the door as if on some trivial errand, it was truly an unhappy event. Hyŏn’s wife was the first to go pale at the news, and even though Hyŏn carried on like nothing was wrong, he too was very anxious about it. He had been called to appear at the station the next morning, but wanted to go right now and get it over with. That evening he couldn’t do anything. He had no appetite, and being a bit on the timid side, fidgeted so much he couldn’t sleep. Whether it was a subpoena or a directive it was all the same to him.

Hyŏn wasn’t some sort of thinker nor was he a political activist. He wasn’t an ex-convict, either. But, whenever some local youths got arrested and had their homes searched, some of Hyŏn’s writings or a few letters of correspondence would turn up. Or, when the police were interrogating some of these youths Hyŏn’s name would pop up, and they would say they had met him while in Seoul. He wasn’t a philosopher to these youths but once he had been implicated, he started getting called down to the station regularly and it appeared that he was even recorded in the police notebook as one of the ‘usual suspects.’ If he was going to be arrested, why didn’t they just come and do it, right then and there? Though it was obvious from all the summons and directives it made him nervous and this time he was vexed. Thinking to find a solution to paradoxical questions like “--Because of the regular army and special student corps conscription system and having to go off and fight and kill Chinese, English, American or Soviet allies, meant not just unintended deaths, but unintended murder. These allies are our people’s only hope and yet we have to give our lives for our foe, Japan--more than a few youths had come seeking this two-bit novelist, Hyŏn. Hyŏn would spend a couple of days with these youths who were on the verge of mental collapse. There was also one youth who, only a day after visiting with Hyŏn, had sent him a suicide note. As he sat there all alone thinking about the future and how he couldn’t join the students in going to war, Hyŏn could not control his resentment over his own status as one of
their unfortunate brethren. Sometimes, when he would suspect someone he had never met before as if they might be a spy sent to size him up, from that suspicion would come an unforgiving sense of self-reproach, whereupon Hyŏn would go on excitedly telling all, not holding back a single word.

After sending them away and sitting in his quiet study, the memory of their faces remained vivid before his eyes and he felt an uneasiness, as if he had committed some crime. But in the face of this impending national doom, he felt this impulse to do something great, something worthwhile. Still, he had not prepared himself in anyway to do anything and was not able to extract himself, to escape, from this hardened shell that he had formed.

"Living submerged under this one ideology is like having one’s soul immersed under water. It’s said that there’ll be a violent revolution. It will be very abrupt—beyond human control. There is no way it will be gradual."

While repeating this passage from his latest short story over and over he could only smile at his own worthlessness.

"You claim that Japan’s days are numbered, but whether by suicide squad or by the volunteer corps, if they carry on with this kamikaze ‘one man one ship ‘policy, there’s no way the Americans can make enough battleships. It seems that your waiting for Japan to lose the war is pretty far-fetched," said Hyŏn’s wife to him that day as he lay there unable to fall asleep. She also said that they should sell their home and move to the countryside, and not just any countryside but far out in the boondocks, away from government authority. Hyŏn had been considering the prospects of something like this long before his wife suggested the idea. Nowadays they couldn’t leave the country, so where indeed would they find a peaceful farming village like in the times of the Emperors Yau and Shun, where the police were nowhere to be seen and dogs didn’t bark at night? Because there was no such Shangri-la, he couldn’t just bide his time in Seoul. So far, Hyŏn, who would sooner give up writing altogether than write in Japanese or collaborate, had already gone some time without an income. The only thing for him to be mindful of was his family. But when it came to his family, he considered it better for them to go to the country and work a few acres of ground
than to stay in Seoul and wither on the vine. Still, just as it was difficult for him to break his own personal shell, it was no easy task to break the shell of his life-style.

“Let’s just keep an eye on the political situation for a while longer.”

This had been his attitude for a year or so now in reaction to the accusations from his family.

At Tongdaemun, the high-ranking detective named Tsuruda assigned to Hyŏn didn’t give a particularly stern impression. As long as his boss wasn’t there he would always start off in Korean by saying that it wasn’t really anything at all, and that he was sorry to call him in again. But this day his boss with the sunken eyes and the bulbous forehead was sitting stretched out at his desk and even Tsuruda ignored Hyŏn’s rather drawn-out bow, only motioning with his eyes for him to take a seat.

Hyŏn fumbled awkwardly with his hat since it wasn’t one of the standard issue Japanese military hats that the policemen wore, and sat down attentively. The detective took his sweet time writing something down and then asked Hyŏn what he was doing these days. When Hyŏn hold him that he wasn’t doing much of anything lately, the detective inquired as to what his plans were. Hyŏn said he wasn’t sure, giving a fake smile, then the detective snuck a glance at his boss. The chief detective was engrossed in stamping some documents with a seal. Then the detective pulled a document out of a folder, and stared at Hyŏn and asked the following:

“Why are you doing absolutely nothing on behalf of the war effort?”

“What can a guy like me do?”

“Don’t give me that. Just do something. In truth, there have been several men like yourself that have been called in and asked ‘What have you been doing for the war effort and in what way is it possible that you could cooperate on behalf of the war effort in the future?’ We’ve received an urgent directive to investigate these things!”

“Well, I’d have to think about it.”

And with that, Hyŏn could only look more awkwardly into the face of detective Tsuruda.
“It would be better for you to report that you’re doing something. Haven’t you taken a Japanese name? That’s easy to do.”

Tsuruda, no doubt, felt sorry for Hyŏn because he thought Hyŏn was stymied by the complicated procedures for changing a name. But Hyŏn didn’t have an answer to this, either.

“Far be it for me to say as a lowly police detective, but we’ve reached a point where we can’t simply turn a blind eye to those who sit by doing nothing.”

“Good point.”

Hyŏn, who now realized with relief that this summons wouldn’t result in his being detained, was humming and hawing.

“Actually, I was just about to do something on behalf of the war effort. So, put me down for something that sounds good,” he said, excusing himself. He headed to a certain publishing house. He had not been commissioned to write anything by the publisher, but had been acting on instructions given through the managing editor which had originated in the police department. And this had come about because at the recent writer’s conference on the war effort Hyŏn had been the only person to give his speech in Korean. He had reluctantly delivered a passage from The Tale of Ch’ŭnhyang. This had ruffled some feathers in the military and so to make amends, Hyŏn had been obliged, without any further ado, to translate the “Pacific War Journal” in order to make a show of good faith.

One day, feeling sympathy for her husband’s mental turmoil, Hyŏn’s wife cleaned his study like she had never done before. But then, when she showered a pile of clippings from Japanese newspapers on him, Hyŏn felt his study had never been so filthy.

‘Ever since we have been old enough to remember, all we’ve had is forty years of shame. To us there were no pleasures of love, no glory of youth, and no honor in art. Maybe if they asked me to write a diary of Japan’s defeat in the war I might agree. But why should I write something beneficial to Japan?’

Hyŏn really wanted to live; more than that, he wanted to survive. It was said that a certain German socialist poet who had been waiting for the overthrow of the Nazis, who were not only his country’s enemy, but the enemy of all mankind and of culture, in his naiveté
committed suicide in despair when Molotov shook hands with Hitler concluding the German-Soviet neutrality pact.

Hyŏn thought: “This poet was hasty in his judgement. Aren’t the Germans and Soviets fighting now? America, England, and China are also fighting the Japanese. Let’s believe in an allied victory. Let’s believe in the rule of justice in history! If the rule of justice and history betrays mankind, then it will not be late to despair.”

Hyŏn didn’t sell his home. The second front had not been opened in Europe. And apparently the Japanese were still hanging on to Rabaul in the Pacific at this time. Assuming that Japan would last at the longest two or three years, he sublet his home for as much as he could get and left Seoul.

He went to a mountain village in Kangwŏn Province where he had some connections with a country doctor. It was eighty li by bus from the nearest train station. In former times it had been a prefecture seat, but now it was just a secluded town with a county office and a police box. Hyŏn had chosen this place because, in the country, pretty much wherever you go, the community doctors minded their own business and didn’t care about the government officials. More than anything else, he thought that by virtue of his association with this doctor he could escape the draft. The village was also in a rich agricultural area and he could solve his family’s food problems. He also chose this area because it was on one of the upper tributaries of the Imjin river and he could while away his time fishing.

But when he arrived and confronted reality, not one of these conditions turned out as expected. The model county magistrate had a good twenty letters of commendation from the government hanging in his township office. In these paradoxical times when the number of commendations received was in direct proportion to how much suffering a magistrate caused the people, this man was no exception. And from early on there had been a great falling out between the magistrate and the honest, straight-talking community doctor. Since this community doctor had been sent off to Seoul for six long months of training, Hyŏn couldn’t ensure that he would escape the draft. Besides the doctor, the only guy Hyŏn knew was the old school teacher he had been introduced to by the doctor. This old man, Kim Chigwŏn,
whose existence the local people only remembered once or twice a year during some particular Confucian rites, never got out much and was as stingy as can be to his family members. But for all practical purposes he was just like Hyŏn--a conservative old gentleman.

The first time he went to the fishing hole it seemed like just a hop skip and a jump, but not only was it a long, hard ten li--the road went right past the police box. In order to avoid the notice of the station chief or the constables, Hyŏn would take a circuitous route through the woods on the ridge, without so much as a path. One day as he rounded the corner of the post office on his way fishing, a Korean constable named Nemura caught his eye.

Hyŏn’s initial reaction was to hide his fishing tackle, putting it behind his back. When he took a couple of steps back and took a closer look, it appeared the townspeople were examining some object that had had its wooden shell peeled off along with the town clerk. Nemura was stripped to his undershirt but was still wearing his leggings and sword. Holding a whip, he was carrying on haughtily in front of everyone around him. It looked like this was going to go on for sometime, so again, Hyŏn decided to take the trail over the back ridge. He beat back the bushes and shrubs as he wandered the steep lower reaches of this mountain that were slick from rain. Just as he finally reached the gentler slopes higher up, who should he encounter but the chief constable, looking like a black bear, not far off in the distance. More startled than if he had just run into some wild beast, Hyŏn quickly threw down the fishing rod he was holding with both hands.

“What are you doing here?”

The constable seemed to be glaring at him.

“I’m just out for some fresh air.”

Then Hyŏn finally took off his cap and went to introduce himself, but the chief constable was already staring off the other way. The county magistrate was also standing over where the chief was looking and when he looked closer to the south there was a rope strung out in a large rectangle about the size of a tennis court. Considering what the chief and the magistrate were saying, it looked like they were surveying a site for a Shinto shrine. Hyŏn just stood there not really knowing what to do. He didn’t have the courage to pick up
his fishing rod, and even if he were to pick it up he had even less courage to cross both ropes and the shrine site. To make matters worse, the chief constable and the magistrate were stealing glances in Hyŏn’s direction every now and then as they whispered something amongst themselves. If there had been some wild flowers nearby, Hyŏn could have pretended to be picking them but there wasn’t so much as even a Chinese pinkflower there.

After who knows how long, Hyŏn took advantage of a moment when the two men were distracted, quickly picking up the evidence that he was doing absolutely nothing for the war effort, and took off for home in a flurry.

“Daddy, why’re you back so soon? Didn’t you go fishing?"

Before Hyŏn could think of an answer for the child, a little neighbor kid piped in:

“Your daddy came back because he got caught by the chief constable!”

On days when he didn’t go fishing Hyŏn would read or go and visit Kim Chigwŏn. And on days when it seemed unlikely Hyŏn would go to the river, Kim would always come and visit Hyŏn. The more time Hyŏn spent with Kim, the more he realized how patriotic and upright an old gentleman he was, and how he was the only man in the village deserving of any respect. Every now and then, Hyŏn would feel the phrase ‘a gem of a person’ was meant for men like this. At the time of the March First Movement of 1919, Kim had been dragged off to prison in Seoul. Ever since Chosŏn fell he had avoided going to Seoul, which had now become the seat of the colonial Government General. It went without saying that he had resisted taking a Japanese name all this time, and from the time he had been released from jail he had continued to wear his hair in the traditional topknot covered by a horsehair hat. Kim was many decades Hyŏn’s senior; the fact that Kim didn’t care about journalism or modern literature and that Hyŏn had no idea what the poems Kim wrote meant, were both matters of mutual regret. There was no need for them to mention their fervent desire or even their secret gropings for this one ray of light as fellow Koreans; they bonded together strongly and after just one or two meetings they became bosom buddies.

One night, Kim came looking for Hyŏn visibly troubled, tears still glistening in his eyes. Because of wartime rationing candles were in short supply, but Hyŏn felt obliged to
light one.

“I beat up my oldest nephew today in broad daylight!”

Kim’s hands were trembling. One of his nephews worked as a clerk in the county office. This man’s sister’s husband—Kim’s nephew by marriage—had been conscripted to go to Japan and on the way had fled and come running back home. The county magistrate found out that he had been hiding at his in-laws’ home and had ordered this brother-in-law to bring him in. The sister’s husband caught wind of this and took off up into the mountains. The wife’s brother had rounded up some of the local policemen and firemen and surrounded him in the mountains; they had hunted him down like a rabbit and brought him to the station.

“Nice brother-in-law,” lamented Hyŏn.

“When is it right for a guy who lets his brother-in-law come hide in his house, to take a bunch of cops up the mountain, beat the crap out of him and lead him into a trap? Even if it should mean him going off in his place? He had been told that if he didn’t catch him, he would have to go to Japan instead, since he had been hiding him in his home. But was it right for them to go as far as stoning when they caught him? Youth these days have no balls.

“Now people even turn on their own parents.

“This really pisses me off. So what if I beat him up in broad daylight? I let him have it for a good long time. Almost broke my cane. He knew why he was getting beat. The people watching must have known, too. If the cops find out I’m in deep trouble.”

This day Hyŏn had a reason to be depressed, too. A telegram had arrived from the Patriotic Writer’s Society ordering him to attend a writers’ rally. The local police station was aware of every little postcard he got, so there is no way they wouldn’t know the contents of this long telegram. At a time like this, when the fate of the Japanese empire hung in the balance, the question of whether or not this guy who was spending all his time fishing would assent to go to the writers’ rally was obviously of some interest, not only to the local police authorities, but also to the Japanese post master, who also happened to be the local anti-communist league. Indeed when Hyŏn’s daughter went out that evening to mail a letter, she was asked if her father was going to Seoul.
Initially, Kim told Hyŏn not to go to the writers’ rally. When Hyŏn heard this, the prospect of not going was all the more frightening to him. The next two days he received his second and third telegrams requesting a reply one way or the other. Kim, who knew this fact, went to see Hyŏn early the same day.

“For old timers like me, it doesn’t really make a difference if we take on the new world or not. But for young fellows like you, no matter what it takes, you have to hang in there and survive so that one day you can do your part. So don’t put up too much of a fight over little things. Just make sure you don’t get drafted.”

Then constable Kanemura had shown up.

“THERE’S only a couple of days left till the meeting. When are you leaving? And if you don’t go, what’s your reason for not attending? Say, if you do go to Seoul, could you get my watch fixed for me?”

Whereupon Hyŏn screamed, “I want to live!”

And with just one day to go until the meeting, Hyŏn took the watch, and went to the writers rally on a miserably rainy day.

There was good reason for Hyŏn to get three telegrams. A few of the executives of the Patriotic Writers’ Society had arranged an evening meeting with the Japanese government general’s head of intelligence on behalf of seven or eight prominent writers whose efforts on behalf of the war had been luke-warm. Hyŏn was the only one absent that night. If Hyŏn ended up with a spot on the program at the rally, it would save face for Hyŏn, but would also show the good faith of these executives to Hyŏn. They had asked Hyŏn to say a few words on behalf of the Fiction Department. At first Hyŏn tried to resist, but since he was already in Seoul he followed them to the rally site the next day. The scene at the Puminkwan was most impressive. Everyone had ceremonial ribbons emblazoned with writing attached to their uniforms. There was His Excellency so and so, from the office of the Government General, and His Excellency so and so, from the Japanese Imperial Army. Both were glistening in their ceremonial attire. There was some Japanese writer and an author from Manchuguo. It was the first grand gathering since the forming of the Chosŏn Mundan.
For his part, the only flannel Hyŏn wore was his trousers. His jacket was stained with mud from fishing in the country. His clothes weren’t even the prescribed civilian khaki color, nor did he wear leggings. The callousness of his inappropriate attire was inexcusable. But there was no way to suddenly change clothes. As he stood there observing the order of events, he suddenly felt a certain fascination for the conference. To Hyŏn’s eyes and ears, which had grown simple watching the carp and listening to the nightingales back in the country, what shocked him most was the barbarity of cultural administration in a fascist state. One of “His Excellencies” even went so far as to quote Hitler’s words verbatim, saying it was time to put an end to cultural things for a while, and that they could be revived later when needed. He said that it would be good to completely wipe out any and all literature and art that didn’t serve the war effort. Not only did these producers of culture—the poets, critics and novelists—applaud the eloquent messages of these armed excellencies, but they all jumped up to congratulate them. Rather than defend our culture that was being destroyed, they sucked up to the lowly likes of these bureaucrats and soldiers. What caused Hyŏn’s heart to ache most was the congratulatory address from the pale, gaunt author from Manchuguo, in poor Japanese. He had a small, sad-looking face that twitched uncannily at the unfamiliar foreign tongue. The Korean author’s Japanese was, for the most part, fluent. Seeing the fluency of the Korean delegates compared to the poor language ability of the Manchuguo delegate, he should have been happy. But what was the reason for this hateful feeling he had instead? To the contrary, he wondered to himself how much honor there was in a dog or pig not being able to produce anything other than its own sound. As soon as a weak nation starts learning the language of a stronger nation, it invites tragedy. Yet, for all that, neither was it the case that everything the Japanese author claimed was natural or correct, either. To Hyŏn, it was most difficult of all to understand the actions of the Japanese author. At one point none other than Yu Chongnyŏl stood up and said:

“Brethren, abandon militarism! The glory of Japan is not in oppressing weak nations. If Japan insists on trampling the human rights of other nations to the bitter end, the whole world will make Japan its enemy. Then won’t it be Japan, not Korea, that ceases to exist?”
When he had screamed this, Hyŏn thought to himself, “Weren’t there also writers like this in Japan at one point in time? Ones who protested loudly when Hitler expelled the countryless Jews, just like in the days when Qinshi Huang torched philosophy and literature, all the while hiding behind the bureaucracy. What are these writers doing now, when we don’t even hear a peep out of them? Unlike the Koreans and the Manchus, isn’t it the case that they still have a country of their own? Don’t they have the duty and freedom to voice their opinions and genuine love for their homeland and people? How is it that fifty years of Japanese culture is so empty, and how are the Japanese so far from solving the complaints of the Koreans and Manchurians? What we have is a pathetic state of affairs with an outpouring of false religions that paralyze even the will to complain. It even goes so far that these Japanese writers are unable to protect Korean culture and art, the origin of their own peoples’ culture. They either become the lackeys of the savage bureaucratic policy of obliterating the Korean language, or they become stooges in this national farce of absurd assimilation. Of course, I know that to those people of culture with a conscience it must be a difficult trial. But aren’t they too complacent about it all?

As he was thinking this, Hyŏn was startled by the sudden sound of applause. Little by little, he realized that it would soon be his turn to take the platform and excrete in Japanese an even more foul message while making funny twitching faces like the writer from Manchuguo. When he looked inside himself and examined his own criticisms of those Japanese people of culture, he found himself in a scary state. What are you doing sitting here? As if in a dream where, leap though he might, he couldn’t move, Hyŏn mustered all his strength to barely ease up out of his chair. But when he stood up, differently from his dream, his feet actually moved. Not even realizing he’d forgotten his hat, he stealthily sneaked out from under the ensnaring gaze of the people at the conference.

“What will happen? Chairman Kayama will be announcing my turn to speak. The executives of the writers’ society will be calling my Korean name, searching for me in front of all the high ranking authorities and officers.”

There was the sound of someone coming down from the next floor. Hyŏn’s first
reaction was to turn into the bathroom. Perhaps the sound of the sword coming into the
bathroom could have been one of the Korean officers who, earlier at the restaurant, had told
them that their necks would not be spared if they were disloyal to Japan. Hyŏn darted into
one of the stalls. After relieving himself for who knows how long, the owner of the clanking
sword left. But then he heard the sound of a different pair of shoes. ‘Surely they won't peek
in here.’ Just like the time crossing the ridge to the fishing hole when he had run into the
chief constable, Hyŏn couldn’t move. The toilets were of the flushing variety, but it was still
a fairly unclean place. Hyŏn lit a cigarette. He felt certain that even the worlds’ worst prison
or jail cell could not possibly be as claustrophobic or have air as foul. And since toilets were
frequented for the business at hand, it was hard to linger in them. When Hyŏn felt this, a
bitter smile came across his face. The sound of applause carried down from far up on the
third floor and then it was quiet again. After it had been quiet for quite some time Hyŏn went
outside. Bare headed though he was, and with a sense of defiant resignation, Hyŏn went to
his friend’s home in Sŏngbuk-Dong, far from were he was now.

His trip to Seoul had not been completely without reward. Starting from the time he
got his repaired watch back from Hyŏn, the normally brusque constable Kanemura, grew
much kinder. It also appeared that the Postmaster, Chief Constable and County Magistrate all
held Hyŏn in higher esteem. Even though it had taken three telegrams to get him there, since
he had gone off to the writers’ rally, they would now take the effort to greet him and Hyŏn,
for his part, could also hold his fishing rod up high as he passed them on his way to the river.

Hyŏn’s fishing tackle and technique were typically East Asian in fashion, so fishing
for Hyŏn seemed a typical East Asian past time. At times when he had no news of the world,
as if dead drunk, or at times when he yearned for a deep snooze, his thoughts immersed in the
river, he would occasionally want to sing in a husky voice. When this happened, it seemed
apropos to chant a *Sijo* or Chinese poem rather than a modern lyric.

小縣依山腳，官樓似鐘懸。
觀書啼鳥裏，聽訴落花前。
Leaning against a hill in a small country village,
as if hanging up a bell to mark my official residence,
I read among the chattering birds,
and judge disputes in front of the trees’ spreading blossoms.
My salary is meagre and some might call me a pauper official,
but I am at ease, so you may call me a Taoist immortal.
Of late I have joined an angler’s club,
and spend the better part of each month at the river.

This was a Chinese poem that Hyŏn would happily recite when he felt like rambling on.
Once, when he had been discussing calligraphy with Kim Chigwŏn, the subject of old
epitaths came up. Afterwards they had gone out to the village entrance where the epitaths
were lined up. When Hyŏn first saw the chief stone standing there in front with “Taesan”
inscribed on it, he couldn’t be anything but pleasantly surprised to find it was the epitath of
the poet Taesan, who was the successor of the Four Great Poets and to learn that Taesan had
been the county magistrate here. Then and there Hyŏn went over to Kim’s house and
borrowed the two-volume collection of Taesan’s works. Almost all the works from his
middle years had been written in this village. There was Man’gyong mountain were Hyŏn
frequently went. And the Yonggu pool where he fished regularly and then there was the
Tumen Valley, Where it was said a royal retainer named Ho from the Koryŏ dynasty had
hidden. There was practically no place that hadn’t been the subject of this poet magistrate’s
poems. It seemed that from early on the poet had yearned for the poetic ambience of Han
Taeji’s posting in a place with mountains and water and forests, and that he was satisfied to
receive such a posting. This was a poem he had composed praising his life of reading books
amid the sound of chirping birds or handing down judgement on the disputes of the locals in
front of the trees scattering their flowers. Though his salary was meagre his freedom and
leisure made him a hermit immortal. And so he had joined a fishing club and for about a
month he had been spending his time by the riverside. If official life was like this, there was no reason for the famous poet Tao Yuanming to give up Peng Zeling. Bound though he was to an official position, as long as he was able to recite poetry, he had literature. Even if he had made a point of retiring from official life to return to his garden in the country, this indeed was the same as literature.

“觀書啼鳥裏，聽訴落花前 -- “Reading among the chattering birds, and judging disputes in front of the trees spreading blossoms.”

Is this the misfortune of modern politicians, that they can’t have this kind of political refinement? Will there ever come a day when we will be able to live with this kind of political refinement? The fact that writers today can’t form impressions based on poetry alone must also be one of their problems. Will there ever come a day again when poetry will be literature? Hell, do we even need a world like that?

Though Hyŏn would constantly recite his favorite phrases from Taesan’s poetry, for him it was nothing more than toying with a curio from a bygone dynasty and he didn’t think it had any relationship with his own literary career today.

‘So what has my literary path been? How different is it from the literature of leisure of feudal times?’

It wasn’t the case that Hyŏn had stopped writing and needed to seek out a place of refuge like this in order to take a good look at himself. Nor was it the case that he had needed to read the poems of former times in order to be able to reflect upon himself. Hyŏn’s literary works up to this point in time had mainly been autobiographical. He hadn’t willingly confined himself to autobiography because he liked the genre, but he held a more candid view when it came to Korean national sorrow than he did about class. He disliked the left-wing which had been inclined toward class struggle. It wasn’t just Hyŏn--the whole line-up of Korean writers was too weak and isolated from the rest of the world to embark on a head-on collision with the Japanese imperial policy toward the Korean people. It wasn’t the
case that the realist coiled up inside of him didn’t occasionally flare up, but under this harsh censorship he had no choice but to comply, and consequently there was no other way than to resign himself to this.

“So now what are we to write, and how should we write it? Japan’s defeated is inevitable. And on the long shot that Japan isn’t defeated, the least of Korea’s problems will be literature and culture. Since the Korean language will ultimately end up leaving the people, then not only the language will be gone, but the last thing to take place will be the ruin of the Korean race. Will history allow this terrible militaristic-imperialistic plot of the Japanese to proceed?”

Even though Hyŏn reiterated over and over to his wife and Kim Chigwŏn that there was one year left at the most until Japan surrendered, in actuality, when he pondered the situation by himself, he was too removed from information sources to know anything, and he felt vague and uneasy. But his anxiety over his options should the fascists win disappeared. The downfall of Mussolini, the opening of the Russian front, the fall of Saipan. Just on the basis of what was reported in the Japanese newspapers, it seemed the fate of Japan was already sealed.

But all the same, Hyŏn couldn’t take up his writing. Not only could he not write himself, he couldn’t bring himself to read the works of others. Though he could sit beside the river and recite the poems of Taesan, he couldn’t deal with the thought of reading literature. He had spent a year reading War and Peace again, but hadn’t finished the second volume. Whenever he was at home he was worried about where they would get their food and firewood. He worried about the holes in the floor, and how inconvenient the kitchen was, and their lack of shoes and clothes and medicine. The money he had got from the sublet of their home in Seoul, which he had calculated would last three years, barely lasted a year before running out. And there was still no guarantee that he wouldn’t be conscripted by the Japanese, as they had implemented a new law whereby men could be drafted into the national army up until the age of sixty. One day he was called into the police station. This time there was no a written directive—a messenger just came in person, but Hyŏn was anxious and
disturbed all the same. The lucky thing was that, unlike in Seoul where he had to wait until
the next day to find out what they wanted, here he could go right over and see.

The entrance to the police station was so full of villagers that you couldn’t get in.
Hyŏn calmly wondered if this crowd had anything to do with his being called in. These
people were complaining to the chief constable that they had harvested their wheat and
barley and had to bring it all in—right down to the seed—for the quota. They were asked day
in and day out to increase production but had had it all taken away, and were now
complaining that they were farmers in name only; since they weren’t getting their rations,
how were they supposed to live? Weren’t they already offering up wild grapes, pine knots
and oak bark?. So they had come to the police station asking them to petition the government
for provisions to live on. The station chief who had been sitting there with a smug grin on his
face suddenly put on a show of dignity and sternness when he saw Hyŏn and came outside.

“No fishing today?”

“Nope.”

“The reason you haven’t been conscripted or sent off to the anti-communist defense
corps is because you’re supposed to be writing on behalf of the war effort. But since all you
do is go fishing, there are starting to be some nasty rumors circulated about you. Just
yesterday when I was at headquarters, they were talking about this certain guy who wasn’t
working and could always be seen on the bus or going fishing. They were adamant in
wanting to know who you were. So from now on until the Japanese empire is completely
victorious, you’d best put a halt to your fishing activities.”

What else could Hyŏn say but,

“Really? I’m sorry.”

“And furthermore, why haven’t you ever attended a send-off reception when we have
soldiers going off to serve?”

“I’m sorry. I’ll come from now on,” said Hyŏn dejectedly.

Right after the first rainy spell of summer the fish fatten up, and since they school up,
the fishing really heats up. The one time of the year when you can really enjoy the river the
most, I’m being confined. Hyŏn put his fishing rod neatly away on a shelf in the kitchen. And now his routine naturally consisted of visiting more often with Kim Chigwŏn. When they met they naturally talked about current events. And when they talked about current events they made optimistic observations; that Germany had already been defeated, and that Japan was already engaging the enemy on Okinawa. And they would dream of Korean independence.

“When did you say that the name of the country should be Koryŏ?”

Hyŏn told Kim what he had heard in Seoul once:

“It would be called the Republic of Koryŏ.”

“Why would it be called Koryŏ?”

“It’s because other countries know us better as Koryŏ (Korea) than as Chosŏn or Taehan. What would you like it to be called, Mr. Kim?”

“I don’t care what they call it. I just wish we would hurry up and be independent. But since you ask, I like Taehan.”

“Taehan! Isn’t that the name we had for just a spell at the end of the Chosŏn dynasty before we were taken over by the Japanese?”

“That’s right. It was the name chosen by the government. Just like in the times of Shilla and Koryŏ.”

“Well, if that’s the case, then wouldn’t it be meaningless to use Taehan now when things aren’t the same as in times of old? The name of a country that springs up for a short time only to be destroyed can be changed by the government or emperor whenever they want; but hasn’t the name of our race always been Chosŏn?”

“Well, you’ve got a point. In the ‘history’ books there is the Ancient Chosŏn and Wiman Chosŏn and this name Chosŏn is all over the place. But as far as I’m concerned....”

And then standing up as he set down his pipe, Kim Chigwŏn continued:

“I’d like to see the former name Taehan and the emperor and the dynasty restored, just like the old days. Then I’d like us to arrange for the new king to get married to a Korean woman and bring the Chŏnju Lee clan back to the throne.”
“You miss the Chosŏn dynasty that much?”

“You bet I do. But I want to bring it back more for revenge on those Japanese sons-of-bitches than because common guys like me are loyal subjects.”

“So you’re planning on going over to Japan and setting up a Korean Government-General?” The two of them laughed merrily.

“Whatever you call it, the Republic of Koryŏ or whatever, would the allies approve of us having an army?”

“I don’t know if it’s true, but apparently they claim that Kim Ilsŏng and Yi Chŏngjŏn have over three hundred thousand troops under them, and have declared war on the Japanese.”

“Three hundred thousand! That’s a big army! When we get independence and our government in exile returns, it’ll be a grand sight to see. Looks like I’ve got something to live for!”

Kim Chigwŏn took another puff on his pipe. Through the smoke drifting up the old man sat in a reverie of thought about the grand entrance that our new government, in all its finery and pomp, would make, escorted by three hundred thousand troops. Later, after it looked like this deep impression was more than he could bear, Kim let out a deep sigh and his eyes filled tears.

Not too much later, Kim Chigwŏn was called into the police station. It wasn’t really anything special, just that the town magistrate had called specially informing them to have Kim come to the main county office. The next day Kim Chigwŏn took the seventy-li bus ride to the county office. The magistrate received him warmly and invited him to his official residence for dinner.

“Why didn’t you attend the Confucian conference in Ch’unch’ŏn last month?”

“You called me all the way here to ask me that?”

“No, that’s not all, there’s something else.”

“Well then...?”

“Rather than dwell on past conferences... You and I both know that nowadays there is
no room for even one person to sit idly by doing nothing for the country. I’m sorry to have to say this to you. You seem like a very conservative type, but don’t even the saints have to keep up with the times?”

“Go on, is there more?”

“In anticipation of the upcoming national Confucian conference, we are going to have some Japanese language classes as well as training on becoming loyal imperial Japanese subjects. So when you come to the training it’ll be necessary for you to cut off your topknot and get a uniform.”

“Is that all you have to say?”

“That’s all.”

“As you well know, I am a Confucianist. When they don’t heed the sage’s words—’I received my body from my parents, so how can I go against them’—what kind of Confucian scholars are they and what kind of Confucian conference can they have? I’m not teaching at the Confucian school for my sake. Since there are no elders who have observed propriety in the rites, as one of the new generation of scholars, I have taken it upon myself as a matter of duty to come and perform the rites on behalf of the sages. Now you tell a toothless old man like me to cut my topknot and learn Japanese and change the color of my clothes. So basically you’re telling me to stop being a Confucianist—I see what you’re doing.”

He said this and left, but before even three days had passed he was called to the police station again. It was on account of a call from the main county seat again, but this time it was the head of the police station instructing him to come in. Kim went and visited Hyŏn on the spot.

“Mr. Hyŏn, it sure looks like those bastards are going to tighten the screws on me.”

“Sure does, doesn’t it. Now that Japanese imperialism is in its final death throes, it might be good to stay out of any conflicts with them.”

“What if I don’t go?”

“No, you’ve got to go. Since they don’t have any pretext, they can’t detain you. But on the grounds that you didn’t show up they would cut off your topknot and lock you up just
like in 1919."

"You’re right. What you say is right, Mr. Hyŏn."

The next day Kim went to the main county office. But three days passed and he didn’t return and the fourth day was the 15th of August.

Not only didn’t Hyŏn have a radio, but even the newspapers that made it to this village were two weeks late. So Hyŏn just passed this most historic of days—August 15th—oblivious to what had happened. The next morning Hyŏn started to sense that something was up when he received a telegram from a friend which read, "Come to Seoul quick." He went to the police station to take care of the formalities of getting travel documents. The constables and chief constable were the same as ever, and when he asked constable Kanemura in a round about way why Kim Chigwŏn hadn’t returned yet, the constable said:

"That ignorant, stubborn old fart needs to sweat it out in a place like that for a while."

"Are you saying they locked him up?"

"I don’t really know. But don’t spread useless rumors," and he stopped. Nothing had changed.

"What reason is there for me to ‘come to Seoul quick’?" Hyŏn sat waiting for the bus wondering what was going on. Then the bus showed up earlier than ever, and Hyŏn left without noticing that Kim Chigwŏn had returned on the very same bus.

There was no one on the bus he knew. Most of the people were wearing uniforms but not one of the people seemed a decent sort of person. When they had gone forty li or so, they met another bus coming from the other direction. The driver waved and hailed the other bus.

"What’s up?"

"What do you mean, what’s up?"

"You got the paper in Ch'ŏlwŏn didn’t you?"

"It’s just like they broadcast yesterday."

"We couldn’t really make it out because of all the static. But it was an unconditional cease-fire."

When the drivers said this, Hyŏn jumped up from the narrow confines of the bus.
"What’re you guys talking about?"
"They say the war’s over."
"The war?"
"Yep. It’s over."
"What do you mean, over?"
"I don’t know. That’s why I’m asking."

Then the other driver shouted back, "Japan lost finally. You can read about it in the paper when you get to Ch’ōlwŏn."

And he took off. At the same time, Hyŏn’s bus suddenly jerked forward, plopping him down in his seat with a thud.

"It’s true! The inevitable has finally happened--It’s finally over...!"

Hyŏn was on the verge of tears up and looked around blinking his eyes. They were definitely not Japanese faces, but they all, without exception, remained stone-faced his outburst.

"Didn’t you all hear what the drivers said?"
Not one person answered him; nobody even turned around.

"If Japan has lost the war then surely you can imagine what will become of Korea!"

Then a man wearing ‘Korean’ clothes spoke up:

"Whatever’s happened, how would we ever know anything about it? What good does it do to shoot off at the mouth about things we have no way in hell of knowing?"

And then even the driver, who had just been chattering on in an excited way, piped in:
"He’s right. I’m even afraid to ask if it’s true!"

And he went back to his tired, subdued, sunken-eyed look. Hyŏn’s head and shoulders drooped. More than the emotion that Korea would be independent, it was above all the dejected sight of these fellow Koreans that saddened him to the point of crying.

"Am I dreaming this?"

But the Kyŏngsŏng Daily which he read as soon as he got to Ch’ōlwŏn was no dream.

He looked up anybody and everybody he could think of and shook their hands, weeping
aloud.

The white puffy clouds dotting the clear sky, the grain growing thickly in the fields, the lush greenery—he wanted to give thanks to it all and yell and jump for joy.

In the early morning of August 17, Hyŏn headed for Seoul packed with others in a train car, like so much sand. They discussed who would be president and who would take over as commander-in-chief of the army. And every time they passed a station they would yell “Long live Independence!” Until their throats hurt.

As they passed each station flying the glorious Korean flag he couldn’t help fretting that he wouldn’t make it in time for the conference that was to convene at ten that very morning.

But contrary to his expectations, when they arrived at Ch’ŏngnyangni station, the people of Seoul were cold, and nary a Korean flag was in sight. When he made his way downtown, he saw Japanese soldiers armed to the teeth, looking as if they might at shoot any second, guarding every intersection. And the mood at the Kyŏngsŏng Daily was as calm and composed as ever.

Hyŏn hurried over to the house of the friend who had sent him the telegram. No sooner had he shaken hands with his friend than Hyŏn asked where the conference was being held. His friend said he didn’t know. He asked his friend where the government leaders who had flown in were staying, and again his friend didn’t know. Hyŏn asked if it was even true that Japan had surrendered, and his friend said that this much was true. Hyŏn felt exhaustion creeping over his entire body and when he sat down, it was the first time he had collected his thoughts in many hours. Then he heard from his friend all that had gone on in Seoul on the political scene since the 15th of August.

The political conditions in Seoul troubled Hyŏn. It bothered him that the Japanese Government-General and the Japanese military were still in place and as demanding as ever. With nobody having a clue when the provisional government would take over, and with some people pushing forward their own unilateral plans to form a government, in the meantime, and with similar things happening on the cultural front, Hyŏn couldn’t tell if it
was all a dream or not. In this moment of confusion it seemed especially impure and rash that with the majority of the cultural leaders still not congregated, people in Seoul should rush about putting up signs as if it was their right and privilege. It worried Hyŏn even more that the group rushing around putting up these banners consisted mostly of leftist writers from earlier days. More than just dominating the literary circles, there was a danger that if the left-wing dominated politics on the national level, it would cause a great rift and lead to national strife and suffering. These were genuine concerns of Hyŏn and when he realized this was how he felt, he headed for the Central Association for the Construction of Korean Culture (Chosŏn munhwa kŏnsŏl chung’ang hyŏbŭihoe). In former times, during the ‘group of nine’ era or during the ‘Munjang’ era, he had had several close friends, and as you might expect most of them were left-wing writers or critics. When he arrived they were editing a draft declaration. Hyŏn felt quite leery of them as he read the draft. He read it several times. As he read he remained vigilant for signs of hypocrisy in their actions and expressions. He couldn’t help feeling a bit strange as he read.

‘Have these guys really been so thoroughly prepared psychologically for Korea’s situation?’

When Hyŏn saw their attitudes and demands, he could find nothing with which to disagree.

‘Above all else, until such time as the cultural and artistic policies of our future government are in place and its institutions are inaugurated, we must strive for the unified coordination of cultural spheres at the current stage, and to bring order to each department.

The liberation of Korean culture; the building of Korean culture; the unification of literary fronts. These were the slogans. More than anything, Hyŏn urgently felt the need to make unification of action a guiding principle, regardless of political preference. He was afraid that the left would confuse things and, as always, he harbored hatred for them. But the more he thought about it, the more he knew it was a baseless fear. It was a time when they couldn’t expect to have any concrete plan of action beyond this. For these men, the fact that they were not starting with class revolution was neither hesitation on their part, nor
self-aggrandizement; but without the benefit of and until they had undergone mature self-criticism, and had considered the relationship between the international line and the Korean nation, there was no reason for them to be satisfied with just these attitudes or principles, which at first glance seemed so simple. Thinking it was fortunate, Hyŏn happily signed his name to the declaration. But he remained uneasy.

“All power to the masses.”

Banners and signs like this flowed out of the assembly hall onto the streets. This may have been a truth, but the masses weren’t ready to hear it yet. To these masses who eagerly awaited some hero or government or Taehan to come floating in off the ocean, to them, it was a time to be immersed in gloriously fantastic illusions and emotions even while denying those rights and privileges that were their due. Even Hyŏn noticed that this slogan was more like something they just shouted as a communist habit, than something they had acquired as democrats. He knew that Victor Hugo had already, in a prior generation cried out “not for the people, but to the masses”, but the phrase “to the masses” in these circumstances seemed neither noble nor dangerous. Hyŏn remained cautious and was concerned that most of the friends and older associates that cared for him were secretly a bit worried about his involvement in this camp. But the objective political situation grew more complicated as the days went on. Not only did they not get a chance to take in the splendor of the long-awaited, grand entry of the provisional government; even individual members of the provisional government were never seen in public. Moreover, the American army in the south was completely ignoring the expectations of the Korean people. The first thing they had done was to spread some leaflets reassuring and showing leniency to the Japanese, even keeping the Government-General and the military in place. Amongst us Koreans, an organization by the name of the People’s Republic had appeared along with the presentiment of confrontation with foreign powers to come. And the Korean Proletarian Literature League (P’ūro Yemaeng), made up entirely of leftist writers, came into being in direct opposition to the Committee for the Construction of Korean Literature (Munhyŏp). As the P’ūro Yemaeng came to the fore, Hyŏn had outwardly joined the Munhyŏp, which sneered at the P’ūro
Yemaeng because they felt history and the times had justified their raison d’être. But inside, Hyŏn felt that if one was to be sincere about the unification of the two fronts, this was the question that needed addressing as a matter of first priority. What made him even more upset was that when you looked at the platform declarations of these two groups, there was almost nothing to distinguish them. And if that were the case, it was also something to make Hyŏn think that the leftist writers from the past might be able to take it as a sign that he didn’t like being a member of the Munhyŏp, which had made him one of its leaders.

Several of Hyŏn’s right-wing friends, as if they had been waiting for the appearance of the P’ūro Yemaeng, quietly pulled him aside:

“We are also well aware of where your heart lies. But in the end you won’t be able to last with those guys. It will amount to nothing. In the final analysis they might claim to be on your side, but they are really siding with the P’ūro Yemaeng. You’ll be left out in the cold, so why don’t you come and join us? What are you dallying for, just to be embarrassed?”

After consenting that there was room to give it some careful thought, Hyŏn parted with them. The next day a demonstration held under the auspices of the United Left Front went coursing down Chongno. Although there were allied forces flags scattered here and there, it was a sea of red flags, and the song sung by the procession was the Soviet national anthem. The crowds on the streets were indifferent to this demonstration. But not only did those at the Munhyŏp assembly hall cheer wildly at this demonstration for the triumphant allied entry into the city, but one of the higher ranking officials in charge of the Munhyŏp even grabbed an armful of Soviet flags that had been bundled amongst all the allied flags, ran up to the fourth floor and showered them down on the procession from above. The street turned completely red. Hyŏn immediately ran up and stopped him. He also stopped him from going back for more flags.

“Calm down!”

“Why should we calm down?”

The two of them glared at each other. And all the other younger writers looked at Hyŏn with disdain. No longer able to throw the red flags, they stomped their feet and clapped
their hands and cheered the left-wing demonstration on. After the demonstration had passed, not one person would approach Hyŏn. He felt very lonely when he left the assembly hall. Even if he should have to part ways with these people, he felt confident that he could form a cultural organization as large as this group.

‘But... but...’

Hyŏn stayed up all night pondering the situation. The next day he didn’t go out to the assembly hall.

“Would it be only like-minded friends? What would be the result of these kinds of self-centered actions in the face of this overwhelming new reality. Freedom and independence in the new Korea has to mean the freedom and independence of the masses. Far from being ignorant of their enthusiasm for the mass movement, on the contrary, I feel it is my duty to study it! I must push it forward, even though it be a little speck. What I wanted to point out to them was that merely throwing out the red flags at this juncture wasn’t a Korean mass movement, and that not all of the masses stood on the side of the red flag. If they cannot understand my feelings about this and they simply misinterpret this as counter-revolutionary, then how on earth will I ever be able to work with them?”

The next day, Hyŏn again had no desire to go to the assembly hall and just lingered in his room. The friend that had been throwing the red flags on the day of the demonstration came by:

“Hyŏn, you were pretty upset the other day, weren’t you?”

“Yeah, I was pretty upset.”

“This is my frank confession. Don’t you realize how much we have dreamed and fantasized about being able to take part in this kind of communist demonstration? When I actually saw one, I lost my senses and went nuts. I’m embarrassed. I was incredibly rash. If you hadn’t been there that day, Hyŏn, our rashness would have gotten out of hand. We absolutely need one person like you more than ten guys like us.”

He spoke clearly and resolutely. They quietly smoked a cigarette together and then silently got up and went to the assembly hall.
After the communist demonstration it seemed the masses, whether students, citizens, or intellectuals, had all divided up into two camps, left and right. In the evenings Hyŏn’s friends would come and pull him quietly aside. Over and over they advised Hyŏn to break away from the Munhyŏp and join with them, but he rebutted them, making all sorts of excuses and saying the Munhyŏp was not biased either way politically. When he arrived at the assembly hall he got a phone call from these friends from the night before.

“Either what you said is a lie, or from what we saw, you’re being used by those guys. If you want proof, just look at the banner printed in block letters hanging down from the front of your building this morning. Then you’ll see.” And with that, the caller wouldn’t listen and rudely hung up. Hyŏn scurried downstairs without a word. He stared up at the banner running down the front of the building. He was stunned. Hyŏn had not seen it when he had come in just before. It hung from the roof all the way down to the second floor. In full-width lettering and in bolder and bigger strokes than he had seen before was printed, “We support the People’s Republic of Korea unconditionally.”

The people filling the median and the teeming throng on the sidewalk were all standing with their heads tipped back, staring up at the banner. They all had suspicious and worried looks on their faces. It took Hyŏn ten minutes or so to walk back up to the fourth floor. He felt severely depressed at having been betrayed yet again. The chairman and secretary of the Munhyŏp had not yet come in. Just then the secretary happened to follow him in. Hyŏn took him by the hand and led him up to the rooftop.

“Who’s responsible for this?”

“What?”

A light drizzle was falling and it appeared that the secretary hadn’t noticed the banner when he came in, either. It also seemed he hadn’t taken part in the activity, either.

“You didn’t know about this either?”

“Honest I didn’t! Who would do a thing like this?”

“If you and I, who work in the same building, don’t know about this, then that means the other members that haven’t showed up yet don’t know, either. This is the work of a
dictator. If this is the way they are going to operate, their talk of the unification of literary fronts is all lies. I don’t feel like trusting them anymore. I’ve had enough, so you can count me out.”

Hyŏn said this as he turned to go, but the flustered secretary blocked him.

“Shouldn’t we find out the facts?”

“It won’t make any difference.”

“Don’t rush to judgement!”

“These guys deserve rush judgements. I’m amazed that these guys would conduct a mass movement as rashly as this.”

“Even so, take it easy! If we split up today, it’ll be suicide for writers like us.”

“So why are they such suicidal acts?” said Hyŏn, raising his voice.

“Honestly, I don’t know either. But if we don’t get to the bottom of it, who will?”

There were tears in the secretary’s eyes. They both ran to where the banner was hanging. The secretary strained to pull up the banner, heavy from the soaking rain, one step at a time, like hauling in an anchor.

‘Whether I’m a fool, or am being used, or am the butt of derision or scorn, isn’t the problem. If I was to worry about that it would be a sign of my insincerity.’

Hyŏn ran and helped the secretary drag up the heavy banner.

He found out later that neither the chairman nor the secretary knew anything about the banner. It was some clerk in the secretary’s office who, had heard that the general opinion within the association was that, whatever the name of Korea was, it should be a people’s republic. And, because at the time when the People’s Republic was announced, there had been an order from the art department to the propaganda team on how to proceed, because of this order, the clerk reckoned that a banner was needed and drafted the text of his own accord. The propaganda team, thinking that the brush strokes weren’t fancy, but that in any case the message was important, had gone ahead and transferred it to a banner; and since it was the propaganda team’s responsibility to hang banners once the paint had dried, this morning before breakfast they had gone and hung up the banner. The banner hung from 8:00
am until 11:00 am, and it’s hanging there for three hours took three months or so to explain away. In fact, it caused a great deal of damage to the structure of the organization.

But as a result of this incident, an opportunity arose for the entire staff of the association to criticize themselves and their policies and to find room to begin approaching unification with the proletarians.

The American army had already moved in and the muzzles of the Japanese army’s rifles, once aimed at us, were cleared away. But just as had been hinted in the American leaflets, the Americans established a military government. Everyone was forming political parties, and over night fifty or sixty parties sprang up. Dr. Syngman Rhee appeared amongst the wild cheers of the people, claiming that no matter your background, the most important thing was that all Koreans be unified. Seeing an opportunity in this, people who had been traitors and profiteers, started acting up. Uniting the people was Rhee’s true intention, but this policy caused the opposite effect, especially when a man that had been the president of an airplane company under Japanese colonialism ended up as president of Korean Airlines. Instead of public sentiment uniting and the people trusting in the government, there was dissension amongst the masses and cynicism in the government. The masses had no choice but to pin their hopes and aspirations on the provisional government that they had believed in from the beginning, even to the point of discarding their rights and privileges, even when the provisional government came back to Korea as individual dribs and drabs instead of making a glorious entry. But our habits, whether they be of individuals or of groups, are they so fatal? Even when this provisional government returned, which had been overseas for so many years and out of touch with the masses back in Korea, it felt no compulsion at all to consult the Korean people. The confrontation between the provisional government and the People’s Republic intensified and Korea’s waistline at the 38th parallel grew tighter and tighter. The only thing on the rise was thievery and the only things going up and up were prices. Just when the people’s nervous excitement had reached a new low, the problem of trusteeship erupted.

Everyone went crazy and cries of opposition to trusteeship sprang up everywhere.
With a couple of friends, Hyŏn also went to an anti-trusteeship lecture, and the text of the lecture was even published in the newspaper.

But Hyŏn, and even a few of the friends that went with him to the lecture that day, were ambivalent and could not help regretting their actions immediately. They slowly began to realize that the problem of trusteeship wasn’t so easy to solve. The thing that brought this home most clearly was what had come out of the communist party. Although they were grateful for the communist party’s detailed observations and political prognosis, it was unfortunate that support for the trusteeship proposal of the three party summit had come from the communists. This provided fodder for the rightists to call trusteeship a communist plot.

“We were too hasty in our judgements about the trusteeship problem.”

“It’s quite a significant error!”

“Error! But given the current mentality of the Korean people it’s not all that great of an error. And besides, it’s good that national pride is being expressed in this way.”

“I don’t know. Don’t you think there’s a big difference between jumping around ignorantly and celebrating something you understand?”

“I do. And now it’s evident that Koreans go off half-cocked and have weak political insight. What does national pride have to do with it?”

“How can we be free from error? Even Lenin said that you can’t do anything without making mistakes. The person who makes no mistakes is the person who is doing no work at all. As long as we know what’s going on, all we can do is do our best at spinning this delicate international line the most effectively to enlighten the masses.”

Hyŏn and his buddies were sitting, talking about this at the assembly hall when in walked an elderly man wearing a horsehair hat and looking very out of place.

“Oh!”

Hyŏn jumped up to greet him. Ever since liberation, Kim Chigwŏn had been on Hyŏn’s mind, and now here he was in Seoul.

“Have you been keeping well?”

“Very well. That’s why I came to Seoul.”
But in truth he looked tired and weak from the hassles of walking and riding in freight trucks from across the 38th parallel in North Korea.

"When did you arrive?"

"Yesterday."

"Where’re you staying?"

"On the way I stopped in at Ch’ŏlwŏn to make sure your family was safe and sound, and it sounded like they really want to come to Seoul."

In the meantime Hyŏn’s family had only made it as far as Ch’ŏlwŏn--they hadn’t come all the way to Seoul yet.

"Well, as long as they’re safe."

"Hyŏn, I just picked some out-of-the-way place to stay to be out from under foot, and then came to find you. Have you been busy?"

"I’m not sure you could say we’ve been busy. I really wanted to see you, because I reckoned you, more than anyone else, would be happy over liberation. I hope they didn’t treat you too badly that time at the county seat."

"I came this close to losing my topknot, but luckily I avoided that!"

"Boy, I’s good to see you."

Since it was lunch time, Hyŏn took Kim Chigwŏn to a little, secluded cafe where they could sit and quietly chat about old times.

"Hyŏn, they say you’ve changed a lot since you’ve been gone."

"Me?"

"Everybody’s saying that you’ve really changed."

"Really?"

Hyŏn was a little melancholy. This was something he had experienced on more than one occasion since the time of the division that had become clear between people that were inclined to be politically conservative and those inclined to be politically progressive. Friends who before liberation wouldn’t have hesitated in the slightest to help him out of any trouble would, at just one or two words, become totally different people. A distance would come
between them and they would keep each other at arm’s length suddenly. Several times, a growing sense of distance was interjected between him and his friends like this.

“Hyŏn!”

“Yes?”

“You know how we Koreans have been thirsting for liberation and have longed for the return of the provisional government!”

“I know.”

“So how could you have joined the communist party?”

“Are people saying that I’ve joined the communist party?”

“It’s all over town; how it seems Mr. Hyŏn has been taken advantage of.”

“Is that what you think, too, Kim Chigwŏn?”

“I don’t know if you changed willingly or not, but I know you’re the type of person who wouldn’t easily be duped by anyone.”

“Thank you. I don’t know whether I’ve changed or not, but I know that before liberation, I didn’t have any clear opinions about all this. The reason is, before liberation most of my friends were passive for fear of being implicated. I’m opposed to taking this passive attitude and doing nothing after liberation for fear of being suspected.”

“Why do people’s natures change just because it’s after liberation? True Confucian gentlemen don’t put themselves in compromising situations.”

“I’m not like that. In our time now, it is foolish, not wise, to not try to fix something that is broken out of fear of being suspected. Suspicion is nothing; we have to work even in the face of danger in these tense times.”

“Anyway, people have to keep their moral obligations. There is absolutely nothing wrong with following those who have spent their whole lives overseas fighting for our people.”

“I understand what you mean. And I’m as thankful and touched by them as the next guy. But now our country’s external and internal situation are not that simple. You speak of moral obligations. Well, just think about the time of the Kwang Haegun and what he did.
During the Hideyoshi invasion we were helped by Ming China. But when the Ming were being attacked by Nurhachi, didn’t the Ming ask Korea for reinforcements?”

“That’s the time in Korea when the whole discussion of moral obligation originated.”

“Right after the Hideyoshi invasion Korea was in no position to aid the Ming militarily. So some ministers formed the “moral obligation” faction on the basis that, even if it should mean the destruction of the nation, Korea should stick with the Ming. But the “Save the Nation” faction advocated that, even if it meant that the country should be destroyed and the king abdicate his throne, there was no way to throw the people, who had been constantly attacked by the Japanese enemy, without even so much as a chance to catch their breath, back into misery. Wasn’t it the King himself who had advocated the position of the “Save the Nation” faction, even if it meant abdication? As for me, I think this regent who was willing to abdicate, throwing out the throne like an old shoe, rather than gamble on the misery of his people and nation, was on the side of the masses much more wonderfully than those leaders and ministers who could think only of moral obligation. You can say what you want about faithfulness and moral obligation, but what reason is there to be biased only toward these guys from overseas?

“Yes, but they were fighting for national restoration all those years overseas by themselves, and didn’t they keep up the fight for twenty-seven years or so?”

“I’m not trying to cheapen their integrity. Whether they were overseas or at home, it’s only right that those who worked sincerely for the nation deserve the respect of the Korean people. People talk about their hardships and bloody sacrifices, but I think that those who stayed home and fought, tortured till their blood ran and locked up in jails and prisons with their limbs frozen were much worse off. And they weren’t just physical hardships. Through the many and varied threats and enticements to sell out, those fighters who fought and struggled right here in Korea never once yielded; knock them down ten times, and ten times they would get up. These people were the most courageous of all.”

“So you really have sided with the communists, Hyŏn!”

“Since when is the communist party the only thing here in Korea? It was a wise
move this time around for the communists to have already stated that the democratic
revolution of the capitalist system, rather than proletarian class revolution, was the line they
would be taking. They are not allowing the radical confrontation of the right and left wings,
and I think it is fortunate that they are trying not to let the polarization of Korea get out of
hand.”

“I don’t even know what you’re talking about, but I know it’s all the communist
party’s fault.”

“Have another drink.”

“What can an old geezer like me know?”

Kim Chigwŏn’s face was soon flushed.

“Do you think that old guys like us don’t have dreams? If the communists would only
stay quiet, we could get our independence soon enough and the movers and shakers in the
provisional government could make good on all their suffering and do a good job governing.
The whole trusteeship problem came up because of their stupid fighting, don’t you think so?”

He said somewhat angrily.

Kim Chigwon thought that the Soviets from without, and the communist party from
within, were trying to hinder Korean independence. All Hyŏn could do was smile and
suggest they eat when he realized that it was impossible by any sort of skill to enlighten this
old man who didn’t have the historical or international understanding, and who simply
mistook liberation for independence.

The next day Kim Chigwŏn came again to see Hyŏn and then the day after, Hyŏn
went to see Kim at his place. On that day Kim said,

“Why are you guys so happy about trusteeship?”

“It isn’t anything to be happy about.”

“If it’s nothing to be happy about and the provisional government is opposed to it,
does that mean you’re going to support trusteeship just for the sake of standing in opposition
to the provisional government, no matter what?”

“That’s an extreme view!”
"But is a guy like me supposed to roll over and play dead when people sell out and want to support trusteeship?"

"That's a bit harsh. So does it look like I have sold out for some kind of future guarantee?"

Kim had nothing to say to that, and it was plain to see that he wasn't at all happy with Hyŏn's attitude. Hyŏn tried as much as he possibly could to stay calm and did his level best to explain to Kim that since the liberation of our country wasn't the result of our own efforts, and since it had come about through international circumstances, Korean independence could not be free from international domination; that support of the three-way conference didn't mean voluntarily accepting or being satisfied with trusteeship; that in a situation where Korean was found between the capitalist country of America and the socialist Soviet Union--both vanguards of their own confrontational ideologies--Korea would have to be insured of its neutrality and independence; that if they were going to give Korea independence in name only, and the Russians, Americans and Chinese in their own respective ways started an underground diplomacy in a Korea that was both politically and economically weak, it would take Korea back to the internecine struggles of the Yi dynasty when the king was forced to flee to the Russian legation, and it would only lead to their destruction again. Therefore, Korea had no choice but to choose a path from their hard-earned freedom to complete independence in such a way that could be guaranteed internationally; that as long as it was the case that this wasn't the war of independence of the Taehan of the Yi dynasty, which it wasn't, a war that entices the masses by crying with nostalgia 'Taehan, Taehan,' for a despotic age, this was not a realistic attitude that could actually guide the Korean people to happiness; that insofar as America and the Soviet Union, who had divided Korea and occupied it North and South, were the world's superpowers, the Korean people would never be able to stand up to or counter them, in any appropriate way, with unrealistic fantasies or emotions, and without the most scientific and historical of opinion. But it was no use. This man that he had idolized before liberation was now stubborn as a rock and wouldn't even try to understand even a little of what Hyŏn said. The only thing he knew was that it was
somehow disagreeable that a fellow Korean like Hyŏn could criticize Taehan, and stubbornly sticking to his eccentric interpretation, he was sure this criticism was a ploy of the communist party.

For a while after that, Kim Chigwŏn didn’t come to see Hyŏn. Hyŏn was busy but he also couldn’t find it in himself to go see Kim.

The problem of trusteeship was a most serious political ordeal for the Korean people. If one day there was an anti-trusteeship demonstration, it would be followed the next day by a rally in support of the three-power summit. All it meant was clashes between the masses, and the political fights these caused among the leaders only got worse and worse. So in the end, the same student conscripts who had born the cross of national suffering before liberation and who had the good fortune to come back alive, this time also ended up bearing the cross of this unfortunate national ordeal.

It was under these somber conditions that Kim Chigwŏn came to see Hyŏn at the assembly hall. He claimed he was going back to the country. Hyŏn suggested that they go and have lunch or something but unlike their previous meetings Kim firmly refused and wouldn’t even let Hyŏn escort him downstairs. It appeared Kim had made up his mind ahead of time to only come to say goodbye and he didn’t pay much heed to Hyŏn’s greeting or offer to buy lunch.

“When do you think you’ll be in Seoul again?”

“If Seoul’s going to be like this, I don’t want to come again. Once I get to the countryside, I’m going to hide away in my hole in Tumen-dong.”

He turned away and resolutely descended the stairs without looking back. Hyŏn stood there dazed for a moment, and then went up to the rooftop to get some fresh air. Kim Chigwŏn’s white overcoat and black horsehair hat stood out clearly through the American army Jeeps zigzagging up and down the street like whirligigs. Hyŏn suddenly thought of the late Ching scholar Wang Guo-Wei. Wang had gone to Japan to give a lecture on Ming theater and Hyŏn had gone to hear it. The Japanese students snickered at his Ching style pigtails, but when Hyŏn, who had no country of his own, thought about Wang’s reverence for
the Ching dynasty it brought tears to his eyes. Later Hyŏn heard that Wang had gone to Shanghai and then Beijing, but no matter where he went, the images of the Ching dynasty which Wang had so longed for, were being swept away.

He chanted: "綠水青山不會改，雨洗蒼蒼有獸間"

"The blue waters and green mountains will never change;
the rains cleanse the debris from among the beasts."

and committed suicide, throwing himself into Kunming Lake. When Hyŏn thought about this, it hadn’t been a foreign aggressor who had brought down the Ching, but a revolution by the people, seeking happiness and truth for the people. The sincerity of Wang Guo-Wei, who plaintively clung to his emperor, was not without its praiseworthiness, but if Wang had turned that sincerity in his life to the cause of the revolution it would have been an even greater life—an even greater human story. Couldn’t his life have been even more dignified for an even greater truth? As Hyŏn stared at the clear image of Kim Chigwŏn, who had suffered such cruelty and contempt under the Japanese, and had braved the 38th parallel coming to Seoul, dimly fading from view like a speck of dust in the current tides of world history, he couldn’t help but be reminded of Wang Guo-Wei’s poignant demise.

The wind was still cool but it was already a gentle spring breeze. Hyŏn smoked a cigarette and went back down to the assembly hall. His friends had finished the merger with the proletarians, and they all busied themselves preparing for the All-Korea Writers’ Conference.