

Challenges of the Japanese Colonial Power in Korea (The Case of Kim So Wol's Life and Poetry)

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The period when Korea was under Japanese rule is metaphorically called 'Korea Under the Black Umbrella'. It was the Umbrella which was hiding, but not protecting, and isolating Korea from the rest of the world for 35 years. During that time Korea underwent drastic and bitter changes: first of all the Japanese caused the last Korean ruling King Kojong (고종; 高宗, r. 1863-1907) and in fact the first Korean Emperor Gwangmu (광무제; 光武帝) to abdicate the throne in 1907 in favor of his feeble son, who was soon married off to a Japanese woman and given a Japanese peerage.

Secondly, Japan governed Korea under a residency general and later on under a governor general who was directly subordinate to Japanese prime ministers. No doubts, all the governor generals were high-ranking Japanese military officers.

Thirdly, the Japanese government treated the Koreans as a conquered people, and until 1921 they were not allowed to publish their own newspapers or to organize political or intellectual groups.

Fourthly, the Japanese rule was extremely harsh and severe, especially in the field of culture and education, and gave rise to strong Korean resistance.

Most Koreans opted out to pay lip service to the Japanese colonial government, but unfortunately others actively collaborated with the Japanese. The treatment of collaborators became a sensitive and sometimes violent issue during the years immediately following liberation.

It happened that Kim So-wŏl¹ ('White Moon', 김소월; 金素月) who's real name was Kim Chŏn-sik (김정식; 金廷湜), was born in Pyŏnganbuk-do in 1906, and lived out all his comparatively short life under Japanese occupation. The Japanese colonial rule influenced his personal life enormously: during his childhood, his father was committed an outrage by Japan for his protest against the construction of railroad behind the Namsan. Kim So-wŏl's father has serious injuries and in the end became a mentally disabled. Japan has taken father's love from Kim So-wŏl. Therefore he usually followed his grandfather who told him many stories about the suppression of Japan.

¹ In this article, I use the McCune-Reischauer's system of romanization of Korean words – A.F.

It seems that Kim So-wŏl's love for his motherland had mostly grown with his grandfather's stories.

In the introduction to his translations of Kim So-wŏl's poems, David R. McCann focuses on contradictory evaluations of the poet's creations made by modern literary critics and historians: the main reason for such inconsistency from my point of view is Kim So-wŏl's relation to the Japanese rule in Korea. For some critics, Kim So-wŏl failed to engage the social and political issues of his day, notably including the complex nexus of the Japanese colonial occupation. For other scholars, the poet did his best in the field of extraordinary control of the expressive capabilities of the Korean language in his works; his deft appropriation of folk-song images, tonalities, and rhythmic forms. For these scholars Kim So-wŏl is still one of the earliest Korean modernist poets².

All the life of Kim So-wŏl can be treated as an example of difficulties, sufferings and torments which Korean intellectuals born under the Japanese rule. When Kim So-wŏl finished elementary school, his financial background was not good enough for him to go to middle school. Although he helped his family's farming between his studies, he graduated first from elementary school. He could enter middle school thanks to the support of the village people.

² Kim Sowŏl. *Azaleas. A book of poems*. Translated by David R. McCann. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007;

Patriotic sentiments gave rise to a Korean student demonstration in Japan, and on March 1, 1919, to a Proclamation of Independence by a small group of leaders in Seoul. With the consolidation of what became as the March First Movement, street demonstrations led by Christian and Ch'öndogyo (천도교; 天道教, or Chondoism, 'Religion of the Heavenly Way') groups erupted throughout the country to protest Japanese rule.

At that time Kim So-wöl was in the third grade. Of course he took part in the movement and fortunately avoided being captured by Japanese police. When he came back to school, however, it was already burned and therefore he had to move to another school.

The March First Movement events caused the Japanese authorities to grant considerable latitude to Korea. As historians have noted, the ensuing intellectual and social ferment of the 1920s marked a seminal period in the modern Korean history. Many developments of the period, including the organization of labor unions and other social and economic movements, had continuing influence into the postliberation period.

In the 1930s, however, the ascendancy of the military in Japanese politics reverses the change. Particularly after 1937, when Japan launched the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945) against China, the colonial government decided on a policy of mobilizing the entire country for the cause of the war. Not only was the economy reorganized onto a war footing, but the Koreans were to be totally

assimilated as Japanese. The government also began to enlist Korean youths in the Japanese army as volunteers in 1938, and as conscripts in 1943. Worship at Shinto shrines became mandatory, and every attempt as preserving Korean identity was discouraged.

The Korean economy at that time also underwent significant change, however, brought little benefit to the Koreans. Virtually all industries were owned either by Japan-based corporations or by Japanese corporations in Korea. As of 1942, Korean capital constituted only 1.5 percent of the total capital invested in Korean industries. Korean entrepreneurs were charged interest rates 25 percent higher than their Japanese counterparts, so it was difficult for Korean enterprises to emerge.

More and more farmland was taken over by the Japanese, and an increasing proportion of Korean farmers either became sharecroppers or migrated to Japan or Manchuria. As greater quantities of Korean rice were exported to Japan, per capita consumption of rice among the Koreans declined; between 1932 and 1936, per capita consumption of rice declined to half of the level consumed between 1912 and 1916. Although the government imported coarse grains from Manchuria to augment the Korean food supply, per capita consumption of food grains in 1944 was 35 percent below that of 1912 to 1916³.

From the late 1930s until 1945, the colonial government pursued a policy of assimilation whose primary goal was to force the Koreans to

³ Source: U.S. Library of Congress;

speak Japanese and to consider themselves Japanese subjects. In 1937 the Japanese governor general ordered that all instruction in Korean schools be in Japanese and that students not be allowed to speak Korean either inside or outside of school. In 1939 another decree “encouraged” Koreans to adopt Japanese names, and by the following year it was reported that 84 percent of all Korean families had done so. During the war years Korean-language newspapers and magazines were shut down. Belief in the divinity of the Japanese emperor was encouraged, and Shintō shrines were built throughout the country. Had Japanese rule not ended in 1945, the fate of indigenous Korean language, culture, and religious practices would have been extremely uncertain.

The Japanese invaders tried to erase Korean national history, and new generations of Koreans in 1930s until 1945 grew up with little or no awareness of their own heritage. Japan altered the history to rationalize the occupation of Korea to the international community by depicting the Koreans as backward and in need of modernization. In order to justify their need to take over their neighbors, the Japanese convinced themselves that, despite being of the same race, the Koreans were actually hardly human⁴.

In 1925, Japanese government established the Korean History Compilation Committee (Korean: 조선사편수회; Japanese:

⁴ Michael Breen. *The Koreans: Who They Are, What They Want, Where Their Future Lies*. St. Martin's Griffin, 2004;

ちょうせんしへんしゅうかい; Sino-Korean and Sino-Japanese: 朝鮮史編修會), and it was administrated by the governor general of Korea and engaged in collecting of Korean historical materials and compilation of Korean history. The Committee distorted the ancient Korean history to validate Japanese colonization of ~~the~~ the ancient Korean history was distorted by the Committee and as follows:

- 1) Korean history was only part of Korean peninsula history;
- 2) North Korean peninsula was the colony of China by Chinese commanderies;
- 3) South Korean peninsula was the colony of Japan by Mimana Nihonfu.

In order to demonstrate their theories, they moved the stone monument, which was originally located at Liadong, into Pyongyang, and then distorted the location of Chinese commanderies such that they existed in Pyongyang.

The Japanese government conducted excavations of archeological sites and preserved artifacts found there. Many of the Japanese ideas, if not all of them, were not supported by archeology. In other words, Japan tried to destroy the ancient culture of Korea.

Even more, the Japanese rule of Korea also resulted in the relocation of many cultural artifacts to Japan. The issue over where these artifacts should be located began during the US occupation of Japan. It is know that at least 100,000 Korean artifacts were looted and stolen during Japanese rule.

The *Chosun Ilbo* (*Korean Daily News*) reports that valuable Korean artifacts can still be found in Japanese museums and private collections. According to an investigation by the South Korean government, there are 75,311 cultural artifacts that were taken from Korea. Japan has 34,369 and the United States has 17,803 artifacts of Korean origin⁵.

Following the annexation of Korea, the Japanese administration introduced universal education patterned after the Japanese school system, with a pyramidal hierarchy of elementary, middle and high schools, culminating at the Keijō Imperial University of Seoul. As in Japan itself, education was viewed primarily as an instrument of “the Formation of Imperial Citizen” with a heavy emphasis on moral and political indoctrination.

Classes in Korean schools at that time focused mostly on teaching the history of the Japanese Empire as well as glorification of the Imperial House of Japan. For sure the history of Korea was not part as curriculum. As in Japan itself, students were made to worship at the school’s Shintō shrine regardless of their religious beliefs, bow before portraits of the Emperor, and copy the *Imperial Rescript on Education*. As the Japanese administrative policy shifted more strongly towards assimilation from the 1930s, all classes were taught in Japanese with Korean language becoming an elective. During colonial times, elementary schools were known as ‘Citizen Schools’ (국민학교;

⁵ Kim Hak-wŏn (김학원). *The Chosun Ilbo* (2006-10-17);

國民學校) as in Japan, as a means of forming proper “Imperial Citizens” from early childhood.

Under the Japanese colonial suppression many public monuments, including several well-known temples, palaces, scripts, memorials, and statues were altered. For example, the primary building of Kyōngbokkung was demolished and the Japanese General Government Building was built in its exact location. The Japanese colonial authorities destroyed 85 percent of all the buildings in Kyōngbokkung. Sungnyemun (승례문), known also as Namdaemun (남대문), a virtual symbol of Korea, was altered by the addition of large, Shinto-style golden horns near the roofs (later removed by the government of the Republic of Korea after independence).

In these terms, after graduating from Paejae High School, Kim so-wŏl taught for a while in his home town and then went to Japan to study at a college of commerce. As it was mentioned, the colonial government restricted the access of the Korean youngsters to a modern education within Korea, but did not mind when they went to study to Japan – on the assumption that the experience would make the students pro-Japanese. However, Kim So-wŏl’s studies in Japan lasted for merely a few months. In September 1923 a large earthquake hit the Tokyo area. It led to mass attacks on Koreans whom the Japanese mobs believed to be responsible for arson attacks. Several thousand Koreans were killed, and others, including a majority of the students, fled the unrests and returned to the safety of their home.

It was around this time that Kim So-wŏl wrote the verses which heralded the birth of modern Korean poetry. He published them in literary journals which began to appear in large numbers after the March 1 Uprising of 1919. The Japanese relaxed their control over the country, and for a while the Korean press and literature were tolerated⁶.

It is said that in 1943, Kim So-wŏl was called by a Japan police station and when right after he came back home, he committed suicide. That was the end of his short life under the Japanese oppression. The time he lived is treated as the worst time during the whole Korean history; the poems he wrote are treated as the first modernist poetic masterpieces created ever by a Korean poet.

Concluding one can state that the unprecedented challenges Kim So-wŏl faced during his short personal life became a real reflection of all the sufferings and torments of his nation under Japanese colonial ruling.

⁶ Andrei Lankov -
http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/opinon/2011/03/165_17042.html