

Perspectives of Korean Modernity from the 18th Century to the Present: Intellectual Struggles for Koreanity in the Age of Globalization

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1989 was not only a great year, but a great modernist year. First, because millions of people learned that history was not over, that they had the capacity to make their own history—though not, alas, in circumstances chosen by themselves. Second, because in the midst of their motions, those men and women identified with each other: even in different languages and idioms, even thousands of miles apart, they saw how their stories were one story, how they all were trying to make the modern world their own. I fear that vision has faded from our public life. Maybe it will return, in ways we can't foresee. Meantime, I want to fight to keep the memory and the hope alive (Berman 1992, 55).

Marshall Berman, "Why Modernism Still Matters."

The triplets of magnates in an age of globalization are modernity, modernism, and modernization: not because of their permanent role as a Trinity, but because of their unchanging function as cultural seismism. These three factors have been powerful driving forces of socio-historical activities in the "attempt to record the shifts and displacements of sensibility that regularly occur in the history of art and literature and thought" (Bradbury 1976:19). For Koreans during the eighteenth century,

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the impact of the western world was more than that of the earthquake. In the name of westernization and civilization, modernization started to demolish the whole value of cultural, spiritual, and intellectual Korean heritages stored up from the past. Between the idea of modernization (westernization, civilization) and that of preserving traditional ideals, there have been endless frustrations, even in this age of globalism. In approaching these matters, our study is going to examine modernity as a basic meaning structure of modernization in each epoch, modernism as a synthesis of modernization, and modernization as a process of modernism.

1. Age of Dawn: Recognizing the Necessity of Modernism

Recognizing the cultural seismology from the western world as a centrifugal force, several Korean intellectuals understood the importance of the modernization of their traditional society during the eighteenth century. The first group was the ‘Northern School’¹⁾ whose manifesto was *utility and social welfare*. Its main stream influenced the second group called the ‘Moderate School,’²⁾ which dedicated itself to the *western technology in Korean thought*. The ideas of these two groups

1) They are Chega Park (1750-?), Chiwon Park (1737-1805), Daeyong Hong (1731-1783), Yangho Hong (1724- 1802), Deukgong Yu (1749-?), and Deokmu Lee (1741-1793). Visiting China, they learned not only advanced knowledge but also equality of living condition. For instance, Chega Park emphasized the necessity of using vehicle, currency, and brick. All the English translations in this paper are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

2) They are Kyusu Park (1807-1877), Youngmok Min (1826-1884), Kijong Park (1824-1898). Their ideas were related to Hongjip Kim (1842-1896) who emphasized “friendship with China, association with Japan, and relationship with America” to modernize traditional Korean society.

were developed in the “Declaration of Reforming Korean Society” (1894), which emphasized many “*DON'TS*”: traffic in human, early marriage, torture, prohibition of widow remarriage, etc. The law of the short hair cut, among others, enforced by government-level, raised great social issues. As soon as the law was declared in November 15, 1895, King Kojong (1852-1919) himself and his prince had their hair cut as an example. “Many people appealed to the government, ‘we will die rather than have hair cut short.’ Their strong hatred of having short hair cuts was not because it contradicted to the traditional morality but because foreign powers compelled them to do so” (Kim 1947:71).

Those early intellectual struggles to make traditional Korean society modernize were summarized in the *Records of the Western World* (1895) by Giljun Yu.³⁾ He writes: “The western world should not be the model of Korean modernization ... and every history undergoes the process of development” (Kim 1973:80-81). According to his division of history, uncivilized, half-civilized, and full-civilized, the last one is the final goal in every culture, whether it is related to the western or oriental model. True-civilization, for him, relates to the understanding of principles and reasons of *the reality* itself. Reality as *Koreanity*—Korean identity as distinguished from other identities such as Americanness and Britishness—can be seen through close consideration of the social situations and cultural ideologies on the Korean peninsula. During this time Korean peninsula was surrounded by competing international powers: Japan,

3) Giljun Yu was born in Seoul, 1856. He studied at Keio University, Japan in 1881, and then studied at Boston University in 1882. When he returned home, he was arrested for the reason that he was westernized. In prison for 6 years, he wrote *Records of the Western World* (1892), though it was published in Japan, 1895.

United States, China, Russia, United Kingdom, France, and Germany. The first two countries can be regarded as driving forces in making the closed Korean society open to the world in positive as well as in negative ways.

2. Era of Experimentation: from Recognition to Practice

Through the efforts of several intellectuals Korea was modernized during the age of dawn. The task of modernization was then in the hands of new literary people who were responsible for translating the Bible and developing new styles in creative writing. Translated Bible took a leading role in educating illiterate people, though it highlighted various contradictions between western and Korean values in religious activities, in living patterns, in family circles, and in educational systems. For instance, it meant for some people that to be modernized is to go to church at that time.

Numerous interrelated aspects in relation to religion demonstrate how the era of experimentation utilized the preliminary training of appropriate modernization in setting up Koreanity. With the help of the Bible translation, a 'pure Korean style' in writing—*Hangul* invented in 1443 by King Sejong 1397-1450—was able to displace the 'Chinese style' and 'Chinese-Korean style.' The latter was influenced by the Japanese writing style during the age of dawn.

We need to investigate the discontinuities of the latter two styles and the continuities of the first until now. Several scholars understood the importance of their Korean language and its systematic studies.⁴⁾ They

4) Bongun Lee's *Korean Logic* (1897), Sikyung Chu's *Sound and Form of Korean*

tried to confirm 'Koreanity' by way of establishing systematic use of Korean. Sikyung Chu emphasized: "Those who try to destroy our mother land may insist on not using Korean but infusing foreign language into it; those who want to help it flourish should try to develop Korean to the highest level. Therefore, even though the study of Korean has just started and is inferior to that of other languages, we must do our best in reforming and improving it" (Sikyung Chu 1907:1-6).

Chu's emphasis of the importance of the systematic study of Korean was re-enforced by Jaehak Choi. He writes: "Korean is the starting point to cultivate the spirit of Koreanity and the standard to keep our land independent. The essential duty of national education is in the development of Korean and Koreanity."⁵⁾ As a leading figure during the period of chaos between traditional and western values, Chu and Choi's momentous understanding of Korean language is directly related to the formation of Koreanity and is indirectly inspired by the attempts of missionaries in their theoretical study of Korean⁶⁾ as well as by methodological teaching of Japanese and English in several schools for foreigners.

The consequences of acknowledging the importance of Korean can be placed in four categories: intellectual acceptance of Korean identity, establishment of Korean grammar, translation of the Bible and hymns,⁷⁾ and development of ordinary people's understanding of language.

(1908), and the 'Institute of Korean Language' (1907) founded by the government

5) Jaehak Choi, *Practical Writing and Korean Grammar* (1909). Re-quoted from Hyun Kim and Yunsik Kim, *Modern Korean Literary History* (Seoul: Mineum Sa, 1973), p.147.

6) H. G. Underwood, *Korean-English Grammar* (1899), J. Scott, *English-Korean Dictionary* (1891), and J. S. Gale, *Dictionary in Studying Korean* (1893)

Through the help of those factors during the period of Korean modernization, the writing style was changed from the pure Chinese style and Chinese-Korean style to the pure Korean style. The last one was mainly practiced in literary works.

Among the three writers, Hyunbae Choi (1890-1957), Yohan Chu (1900-1979), and Kwangsu Lee (1892-?), Lee was a main figure who spread the thought of modernization of Korean society through his literary works. His work *Heartlessness* (1917), is usually seen as the first modern-style Korean novel not only in its form, written in modern Korean style, but also in its contents: it contains the trend of international modern society. Lee strongly emphasized the necessity of western style (new style) education in order to reform the traditional Korean society in everyday life.⁸⁾ Through education, he believed that Koreans would be able to overcome their fatalistic life-view,⁹⁾ to recognize the holiness of occupation and daily work,¹⁰⁾ and to develop

7) The first Korean translation of the Bible and hymn was begun in 1882 and the 'Committee of the Bible Translation' was organized in 1887. Especially in 1895, John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress from This World to That Which Is to Come* (1678) was translated in 1895.

8) The two main characters in Lee's novel discussed reformation and modernization of traditional Korean society by education: "How can we do?" "By teaching! By leading!" "How?" "By educating! By practicing!" *The Works of Kwangsu Lee*, vol. 1 (Seoul: Samjung Dang, 1962), p.310.

9) In his essay on "Fatalistic Life-View and Self-Reliant Life-View," Lee asked to find out the self as a core of social activity. This idea was propounded in his another essay on "Children-Centered Family," in which he emphasized that children are the hope of our Korean future society

10) Traditionally, there were four classes strictly limited in socio-political family lineage: aristocrats, farmers, artisans, and tradesmen. Lee's novel reads: "That aristocrats don't need to find job is a past idea ... now is the time when those of tradesmen, artisans, and farmers belong to aristocrats." *The Works of Kwangsu Lee*, vol. 1, pp.496-98.

the sacred idea of *free love*.¹¹⁾ What he wanted to make clear by the term 'free love' was a kind of true love based on the confirmation of self-identity. Lee's first recognition of the *self-identity* produces the idea of individual, western, and modern rationalism: "The way of thinking rationally ... means legality, morality, and circumstance. Its condition can be changed according to the national, social, temporal, and individual situations" (Kwangsu Lee 1962:56).

3. Development of Modernism in Literature: 1930s to the Present

Literary modernism in its true sense was first attempted during the 1930s by Kwangkyun Kim (1914-1993)¹²⁾ and Sang Lee (1910-1937).¹³⁾ While the former dedicated himself to the modernistic style of poetry, the latter tried to deal with literary psychology in his poems and novels. At the end of Lee's novel, *Wing* (1936), the protagonist shouts: "Let me have my wing at my armpit. Let's fly, let's fly, let's fly. Let's fly once again, let's fly once more." For him, *flying* means to seek a new age of modernism, which included avant-garde, Dadaism, sur-realism,

11) "Do you love me?" Hyungsik asked and looked at Sunhyung. Sunhyung was so much surprised that she was afraid to answer. Since she is his wife, it is her duty to respect him in everyway. Love? She did think of it, never! She did not know she has such a right to love. For her, Hyungsik's question was a kind of thunderbolt from a clear sky. *Works of Kwangsu Lee*, vol. 1, p.250

12) His poetic world is evaluated as imagism and modernism. His anthologies are *Gas Light* (1939), *A Port to Call* (1947), and *Song of Dusk* (1957).

13) His real name is Haekyung Kim, and he studied architecture and experimented his advanced ideas in his poems and novels. Among his many literary works, well-known novels are *Wing* (1936) and *Records of Meeting and Parting* (1936), and most problematic poems are "Mirror" (1933) and "Crow's Eye View" (1934). His poems still matters in interpreting and explaining.

and the method of automatic writing. Among his many poems, we can see such examples as “Memorandum on the Line,”¹⁴⁾ “Poem No.1”¹⁵⁾ included in the “Crow’s Eye View” and “Mirror.”¹⁶⁾

As a forerunner in practicing modernist literary thought during the 1930s, Lee employed numbers, geometrical diagrams, and abstract ideas in his poems. Korean literary critics (Chung 1964; Kim 1966)

14) 1 2 3
 1 . . .
 2 . . .
 3 . . .
 3 2 1
 3 . . .
 2 . . .
 1 . . .

. . . $nPn=n(n-1)(n-2)\dots(n-n+1)$

(Just like a fan, the brain spreads to the circle and turned completely)

15) Thirteen children run fast on the road./ (It should be a road closed at the end)//The first says, “I’m afraid.”/ The second says, “I’m afraid.”/ The third says, “I’m afraid.”/ The fourth says, “I’m afraid.”/ The fifth says, “I’m afraid.”/ The sixth says, “I’m afraid.”/ The seventh says, “I’m afraid.”/ The eighth says, “I’m afraid.”/ The ninth says, “I’m afraid.”/ The tenth says, “I’m afraid.”// The eleventh says, “I’m afraid.”/ The twelfth says, “I’m afraid.”/ The thirteenth says, “I’m afraid./ (It would be better, no other accident.)// Among them only one may be a horrible child./ Among them only two may be horrible children./ Among them only two may be children to be afraid./ Among them only one may be a child to be afraid.// (It should be a road open at the end)/ It would be good, the thirteen children do not run fast on the road

16) No sound in the mirror/ No world is that quiet./ I have ears in the mirror too./two pitiful ears/ that cannot hear my own voice./ I am left-handed in the mirror,/ left-hander unable to shake hands./ I cannot touch myself in the mirror/ because of the mirror,/ but how could I ever meet myself/ in the mirror/ but for the mirror?/ Though I have no mirror in me/ there is always *I* in the mirror./ I do not know for sure but the mirror // is engaged in his one-sided struggle./ The mirror *I* is my reversal./ The resemblance of the two is remarkable./ I feel extremely sorry that I cannot worry about/ or examine myself in the mirror. Jaihiun Kim trans., *Korean Poetry Today* (Seoul: Publishers, 1995), p.86.

estimated his poetic world to be influenced by Tristan Tzara's *Sept Manifestes Dada* (1924) and André Breton's *Manifeste du surréalisme, Poisson soluble* (1924). Several of his literary works appeared serially in the *Korea-Center Newspaper* from July 23, 1934, so much confused the readers "—Is it a madman's silly talking?" or "Is it a dog's barking?"—that the editor carried his resignation in the pocket. The poet armed with advanced thought led his literary circles while readers could not follow his poetic world. For those tragic visions of Korean literary situation, Lee says:

I can't understand the reason why they call me mad. Is it good for us to live in the thousands years ago while others develop everyday. Yes, I know well that my ability is not good enough, but we have to regret how many days we have spent in our own peace without comparing with others. My literary works are quite different from those of epebes—Iron—this is an implication of my new literary road. I'll never belong to any other group, however, how pitiful it is that there is no one who can understand my poetic world (Hanmo Chung 1974, 428).

As "a genius stuffed," Lee thought himself "a strong poet" who led his literary society. Such examples can be found in Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (1973), in which Bloom writes: "The history of fruitful poetic influence is a history of anxiety and self-saving caricature, of distortion, of perverse, willful revisionism without which modern poetry as such could not exist" (Bloom 1973: 30).

Completely de-constructing the ordinary writing style, Lee tried to convey the ideas of modernism to the Korean literary society. His method was too advanced to be acceptable. Lee's leading ideas were

inherited by the members of the so-called ‘Later Group of Modernism’¹⁷⁾ at the end of the 1940s. After they published their first anthology, *New City and Citizen’s Chorus* (1949), their poetic attitude toward modernism was different from each other: from the recognition of Korean language to the revelation of the military tyranny. At the end of the 1950s, poets who have inherited the recognition of Korean language declared their manifestoes on poetic language. Such examples can be seen in Suyoung Kim’s “every language is a mistake,” Chunsu Kim’s “language as a being exists at the end of a windy bough,” and Uk Song’s “Korean language is my mother land.” Almost everytime, Chunsu Kim’s poetic world understands everything as *a thing itself*. Knowing that language is not good enough in describing the thing itself, he employs images in a new way. One of his well-known poems, “Flower” reads:

It is nothing but a mere pose
before I name it.
When I call it by name
it comes to me and becomes a flower.

Would that someone called me by a name
that matches my color and odor;
I shall come to him and become a flower.

All of us desire to be something meaningful to each other,
you to me, I to you. (Jaihiun Kim 1995, 189).

17) They are Suyoung Kim (1921-1968), Kyungrin Kim (1918-), Kyudong Kim (1923-), Inhwon Park (1926-1956), etc. Though Chunsu Kim (1922-) was not a member, his poetic world pursues literary modernism.

“Flower” in the poem is an object of epistemology to be recognized by someone. In this sense, its meaning is different from that of Sowol Kim’s (1902-1934) “Azaleas”¹⁸⁾ in which ‘azalea’ means ‘parting love’ or that of Yongun Han’s (1879-1944) “Love’s Silence”¹⁹⁾ in which “gold-mosaicked flower” means ‘permanent love.’

Among the three poets—Hyunjong Chung (1939-), Tongkyu Hwang (1938-), and Sunghun Lee (1942-)—who started writing poetry in the beginning of the 1960s, Lee is still enthusiastic in pursuing the style of modernism. His recent poem entitled “Life as a Text” reads:

Not me but language exists, language is I who makes
me. In this poem, in this text, in this weaving, in the
entangled strings, in the socks, in the knits, in
the sweaters, in your stockings, I only exist.

18) If you go away/ because you cannot bear with me/ in silence I bid you God
speed./ Azaleas aflame on Yaksan Hill/ I will gather with full hands/ and scatter
them in your path./ Tread with a tread,/ light and gentle,/ on the flowers as you
go./ If you go away/ because you cannot bear with me/ no tears will I weep
though I perish. Jaihiun Kim trans., *Korean Poetry Today* (Seoul: Publishers,
1995), p.39.

19) Love is gone, gone is my love/ Tearing himself away from me he has gone, on
a little path that stretches in the splendor of a green hill into the autumn-tinted
forest./ Our last oath, shining and enduring like a gold-mosaicked flower, has
turned to cold ashes, blown away in the breath of wind./ I remember his
poignant first kiss and its memory has wrought a complete change in my destiny,
then withdrawn into oblivion./ I hear not his sweet voice; I see not his fair
looks./ Since it is human to love, I, alert, dreaded a parting to come when we
met./ The separation came so suddenly it broke my heart with renewed sorrow./
Yet, I know parting can only destroy our love if it causes futile tears to fall./ I
would rather transfer the surge of this sorrow onto the summit of hopefulness./
As we dread parting when we meet, so, we promise to meet again when we
part./ Though my love is gone, I am not parted from love; an untiring love-song
envelops the silence of love. Jaihiun Kim trans., *Korean Poetry Today* (Seoul:
Publishers, 1995), p.3.

Do I exist there? Do you say that I exist there?
 Oh no. Without knowing the fact, only looking at
 The mirror, I'm now more than 50 years old. Indecent!
 How indecent am I who has spent only looking at
 the mirror? I hit myself with my fist, then I write
 this poem. In this poem, in this language, in this
 language included nothing, in the non-being, in the
 nothingness, I only exist (Sunghun Lee 2000:72).

Lee is evaluated as one of the last Korean modernist poets, since he has been trying to follow up those of recent international literary trends from the avant-garde, sur-realism, modernism, post-modernism to de-construction. His ultimate method, however, is based on his language-view in which he believes that language cannot fully name the thing itself.

4. Conclusion

As it can be traced in C. R. Darwin's *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* (1859), Karl Marx's *Capitalism* (1867), F. W. Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883-1884), Sir J. G. Frazer's *The Golden Bough: The Roots of Religion and Folklore* (1890), and Sigmund Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), western modernism was begun by breaking with pre-modern thoughts and ideas. With those understandings, they were able to overcome the traditional beliefs so that man is no longer the son of God, that work and pay should be equal in each class, that there is no absolute God but "Superman," and that myths and legends scattered around the world are systematically arrangeable.

Korean's understanding of how to modernize its society was begun by those early intellectuals who had contact with Chinese practical culture during the eighteenth century. In the name of modernization, westernization and culturalization, Korean social consciousness was so sharply penetrated that the so-called traditional values were confronted by the whole turmoil of socio-political demolitions. Not to lose the valuable heritages, those early intellectuals tried to emphasize how important it was to keep Korean identities, namely the Koreanity in this paper. One of them was the western technology in Korean thoughts, which the 'Northern School' developed and the 'Moderate School' culminated. Those efforts to modernize Korean society were practiced by several 'westernized groups,' including *Records of the Western World* and "Declaration of Reforming Korean Society." To be modernized/westernized/cultivated, Koreans had to have a short hair cut in contradiction with their traditional morality (which seems to be ridiculous for us, living in this techno-maniac society). However it was a turning point for them to take a step toward the international world.

The second was the cultivation of Korean language to the highest level in comparison with two foreign languages: Japanese and English. From the first they experienced Chinese-Korean writing style and from the latter pure Korean style. Those who were inspired by the Bible-translation and several foreign languages, advanced Korean linguists made Korean grammar systematic. In other words, they realized the necessity of Koreanity in the course of pursuing modern western society. In this sense, as I have suggested in another study,²⁰⁾

20) See my paper unpublished but read in The Committee on Literary Theory, "Cultural Glocalism in the Age of Multiculturalism: Overcoming the Present and Directing the Future," Workshop 3: Cultural Encounters-Conjunctions and

I propose modestly once again cultural ‘glocalism’ (*globalism+localism*), not cultural ‘globalism.’ In relation to the idea of Koreanity, education means the goal of life, the method of success, and the tool of competition. It means everything from the past to the present. In Korean society, it has been emphasized: “to learn is to get a power.”²¹⁾ This reflects the Korean enthusiasm for education, which is one of the subject matters of Kwangsu Lee’s *Heartlessness*, discussed in the second part of our study.

In the course of modernization, Sang Lee led Korean literary modernism during the 1930s and his poetic heritage is inherited by the groups of the 1950s and 1960s. Among many others, Chunsu Kim and Sunghun Lee’s poetic world was discussed in our study in relation to its epistemology of ‘language itself.’ Since national language itself has been considered “the body,” “the soul,” and “the mother land,” it seems to be natural for Lee to write: “I’m a poet who loves language/ Dear language! We have fought as long as we could” (Lee 2000:54)

As a meaning structure of modernism in each step, modernity in Korean literary society has been changed from mere imitation of the western world to the recognition of the method of cultivating our national language. Modernization can be defined as the process of practicing modernity. As Marshal Berman says, modernism still matters around the world.

Disjunctions, XVIth Congress of ICLA, Pretoria, 13-19 August 2000.

21) Here are several examples, funny but meaningful sayings prevalent at that time. “Do you know letters?” “Yes, I know, white is paper, black is letters.” “He does not know even ‘ㄱ’/k/ in front of a sickle.” “Look! the wild geese are flying in the form of ‘ㅍ’/s/.” As these sayings imply, Koreans had done their best in educating and learning, in getting and practicing new knowledge.

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Abstract

For the effective study of Korean modernization from the 18th century to the present, three areas have been investigated in my paper: the age of dawn in recognizing the necessity of modernism, the era of experimentation from recognition to practice, and the development of modernism in literature: from the 1930s to the present. Through whole process of discussing those matters, *Koreanity*—identifying itself to be Korean—has been emphasized.

While the so-called traditional values confronted with the whole turmoil of

socio-political demolitions in the name of modernization, westernization, and culturalization, Korean intellectuals tried to emphasize how important it was to keep Korean identities, namely the *Koreanity*. Such examples can be seen in the activities of Northern School and Moderate School. Though Koreans had to have a short hair cut in contradiction with their traditional morality to be modernized/westernized/cultivated, it was a turning point for them to take a step toward the international world.

During the period of Korean modernization through the impact of Western world, Korean language—*hangul*—has been cultivated to the highest level in comparison with two foreign languages: Japanese and English. Those Korean linguists who were familiar with these two languages made Korean grammar systematic and they understood the importance of preserving Koreanity in the course of pursuing modern western society. In this sense, Korean modernism is related to the cultural *glocalism* (*globalism*+ *localism*), not to the cultural globalism.

Through the help of socio-political modernization, Korean literature in modernism has been full bloomed in the early years of 1930s. One of the leading poets was Sang Lee whose poetic heritage is inherited by those groups of 1950s and 1960s. Among many others, Chunsu Kim and Sunghun Lee were the main figures in realizing the fact the poetry is written in Korean which they considered the body, the soul, and the mother land.