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# Im Hwa Before and After Japan

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John Whittier TREAT (Yale University)

## I. Introduction

On September 11, 1905, the San'yō Steamship Company, Ltd., a new venture of the San'yō Railway, launched scheduled ferry service between Busan on the Korean peninsula and Shimonoseki on the opposite island of Kyushu. The Genkainada Straits (known in Korea as the Hyeonhaetan), filled with warships during the Russo-Japanese War (1904–05), was now the maritime passage for Korean and Japanese civilians to move between their two countries with relative ease and economy. In time, Im Hwa (1908–53) would be one of them. What follows is the story of how Im's fate as a twentieth-century writer marooned among the shoals of Korean, Japanese and American history remains opaque today.

Im wrote a long poem about the historic water passage between Korea and Japan, and one stanza succinctly expresses the meaning it held for his generation, one raised under Japanese hegemony and its associated prestige and peril:

*Today, too Once more Young people  
Like eager children  
Cross this sea without hindrance And return  
Tomorrow, too Once more  
The Hyeonhaetan Straits will be young people's ocean passage* (qtd. in Kawanishi 589)

Im was, in the words of literary historian Nam Bu-Jin (a Korean “newcomer” to Japan), “the preeminent [*daihyōteki*] proletarian literary critic before the war” (77), and was a major influence on such Modernist poets in Korea as Yi Sang to follow him (Kim, *Im Hwa Yeongu* 116–22). But that does not mean he was

always steadfastly opposed to cooperation with the Japanese, who persecuted proletarian writers at home and abroad. In his authoritative study of Im Hwa, Korea's most renowned scholar of modern literature Kim Yun-Sik writes the following about the hold that Japan and especially its capital Tokyo had on the minds of aspiring writers in colonial Korea:

Starting in the late nineteenth century, Tokyo was the intellectual Mecca for Korean intellectuals. Tokyo was always where Korean students became self-aware. It was a place that quenched their thirst for knowledge, and for which they felt a love that was difficult to describe. As the capital of the enemy country, it cast a spell upon them; it was a place Korean intellectuals could not help be afflicted to one extent or another with schizophrenia. Thus Tokyo was more than a place name; it was quite nearly a term for a state of mind. (*Im Hwa Yeongu* 118)

“Tokyo” was of course a powerful idea as well as actual place for aspiring Japanese writers, too, many of who went to the city from the provinces and may well have felt their own ambivalence at being there. But this had to have been even more so for young men from a colony, where little was unambiguously “modern” save that built by the Japanese—and in Seoul, that usually meant those sections of the city dominated by the Japanese themselves.<sup>1</sup> Elsewhere, I have compared the situation of Korean students ‘*yuhaksaeng*’ in Tokyo with what Frantz Fanon wrote about Caribbean students (“Antillean Negroes”) in Paris: aspirants for a cosmopolitan modernity within close reach but finally closed to them (318).

Im Hwa was almost the prototypical *munhak cheongnyeon* ‘literary youth.’ Dashing and debonair, described by his contemporary An Seok-Ju in 1933 as “Korea’s Valentino,” or as a Raskholnikov character right out of Russian literature (Kim, *Shōkon to kokufuku* 214). He was born Im In-Sik in Seoul in 1908 and raised amid the relative affluence of the Gahoe-dong district in a family that had recently ascended into the bourgeoisie. His interest in poetry was evident from late childhood. Im’s verse can strike readers today as highly

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1. For a new and detailed study of public space in Seoul under Japanese rule, see Todd A. Henry, *Assimilating Seoul: Japanese Rule and the Politics of Public Space in Colonial Korea, 1910–1945*, as well as the earlier and equally useful study by Mark Caprio, *Japanese Assimilation Policies in Colonial Korea, 1910–1945*.

sentimental and overwrought, but his early reputation as a poet was as a radical one, both artistically and politically. He was already fashioning himself as a “Dadaist” avant-garde poet and cineaste—Takahashi Shinkichi, for example, was an influence on him—before he crossed the Straits himself in 1929 to study English literature at the Tokyo Higher Normal School. But by the time of his return to Korea several years later he was fully proletarianist in his announced creed, having added Japanese writers such as leftwing dramatist Murayama Tomoyoshi to his list of mentors. In 1932 he was chosen for an important position in KAPF (*Kapeu*, the “Korea Artista Proletaria Federacio”)—a shift in his career described by Kawamura Minato as one from “the revolution of art” to “the art of revolution” (*geijutsu no kakumei kara kakumei no geijutsu e*), a move common among not a few Japanese writers of the day as well (181).

## II. Im Hwa and the Japanese Empire

Prominent among Japanese proletarian writers in those days was of course Nakano Shigeharu (1902–79). His poem “Shinagawa Station in the Rain” (Ame no furu Shinagawa eki 1929) especially excited kindred Koreans such as Im. Indeed Im would, seven months later, publish his own poem as a rejoinder to Nakano’s, but it would be a case of repetition with a difference. Nakano’s “Shinagawa Station in the Rain” was published in February, 1929, issue of the journal *Kaizō* heavily censored, but its message nonetheless clear. Twenty years ago Japanese historian of Korea, Mizuno Naoki, reconstructed the likely original text from a much less-censored Korean translation of the poem published in the summer of 1929, which I now quote from English translation:

*Oh!*  
*you Koreans, both men and women*  
*brazenly bold comrades to the very core,*  
*the front and rear of the Japanese proletariat,*  
*go to that hard, thick, smooth ice and smash it*  
*make the water dammed so long gush forth*  
*and then fly back on fluttering wings across the straits*  
*past Kobe and Nagoya and into Tokyo*  
*get close to him*  
*stand before his very face*

*grab him  
hold his jaw back  
thrust the sword deep into his chest  
bathe in the spurting blood  
laugh and cry in the joy of a revenge  
that comes with the warmth of a body. (100–01)*

You can well imagine the reactions that such a poem would stir, not only among the Japanese authorities—“him” was surely and correctly assumed to mean Emperor Hirohito—but also among the Koreans directly addressed and admonished by Nakano. Here we have a succinct example of the rampant “left imperialism” in prewar Japan and Korea, in which erstwhile progressive Japanese intellectuals echoed their dominance of colonial counterparts by scripting for them real but usually imaginary instrumental roles in the class and national struggles of the empire: you do the killing, and at our bidding.<sup>2</sup> Im’s subsequent retort, entitled “The Yokohama Dock with an Umbrella” (Usan Badeun Yokkohamaeui Budu), tells a slightly different story—in the long tradition, from ancient Rome to the American South, of the slave simultaneously mimicking and mocking the master—and one from a Korean point of view:

*Girl of the harbor! Girl of a foreign land!  
Don't come running out to the dock. It is wet with rain.  
I burn hot with the sadness of leaving with, with the anger of being deported  
The harbor and the Yokohama girl I love  
Don't run out to the dock, the railing is wet  
But even if the weather were fine . . .  
No, no, they'd be nothing we could do, pitiful words for you  
the rain falls in your country  
were this dock swept away  
Sad you, crying crying  
were your small throat to choke up  
you would not keep this rebel youth from abroad from deportation*

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2. See Nikki Dejan Floyd, *Bridging the Colonial Divide: Japanese-Korean Solidarity in the International Proletarian Literature Movement*, for a thorough study of this “left imperialism.”

*sad harbor girl, do not cry.* (Kim, *Im Hwa Yeongu* 248–49)

These two poems are in a “cross-straits” dialogue with each other. The collaboration, if you will, of these two writers—one famous and the other destined to be—is less harmonious than it is contestatory. First, Nakano urges the Koreans to do the necessary dirty business Japanese themselves have failed to; and then, Im’s young rebel about to be deported pays a high price for just such sentiments, and thus embodies a fact of life utterly absent in Nakano’s verse—namely, that resistance comes with risks. That Im wrote his poem in Korean and not Japanese suggests he was less interested in challenging Nakano personally than he was in speaking to his own countrymen. Nonetheless, the encounter of twentieth-century Korea and Japan is the common theme of both works, and they are, if you will allow, a collaborative commentary on the conundrum of progressives united and divided by the colonialism that encompassed them both. Im, not surprisingly, did not allow this particular poem to be republished post-Liberation.

Only a few years later Nakano would be one of the most famous Japanese writers to commit an “ideological conversion” (*tenkō*) under the pressure of the police. Many left intellectuals did so in Japan, most notably the Japan Communist Party leaders Sano Manabu and Nabeyama Sadachika, but Nakano was surely the most prominent literary figure to do so.<sup>3</sup> In 1934, Im was arrested and imprisoned by the Japanese authorities in Korea (not for the first time) and performed his own either voluntary or involuntary “ideological conversion” (*cheonhyang*). Unlike other apostates in both Japan and Korea, however, Im never published a public declaration of his conversion, but it was known at the time, a point to which I will return. But at this juncture I will observe that the eventual fate of Japanese who renounced their politics was quite different from those Koreans who did. After the war, Japanese were largely allowed to recant to their recantations and resume their lives and careers; Koreans such as Im, however, would be branded traitors and in some cases, Im’s included, meet a very different, darker destiny. But that will lie in the future.

KAPF disbanded under the Japanese Government-General’s pressure in

3. For more on Nakano’s career leading up his apostasy, see Miriam Silverberg, *Changing Song: The Marxist Manifestos of Nakano Shigeharu*; for a sociological analysis of *tenkō* in general, see Patricia Steinhoff, *Tenko: Ideology and Social Integration in Prewar Japan*.

May, 1935. The authorities sooner or later detained all its members over a period of the next eighteen months. Im assumed a major, if not enthusiastic, role as an intermediary between writers in Korea and Japan, promoting the line that the former had a mission within world literature (*segye munhak*) as a “region” (*jibang*) of the latter (“Donggyeong” 40). But he largely devoted himself to the non-political pursuits of the classics, editorial work, the study of traditional Korean folk culture and the writing of one of Korea’s first modern literary histories, which he serialized for years until halted by Japanese censors.

When, in 1939, he described World War I as a time when Europe was dominated by “action rather than intellect, submission rather than freedom” (Saegusa 117), Im was surely also describing Korea under what would be called, after Liberation, the *amheukki* or “Dark Period” of the years of total war. With our hindsight today, Im’s approach was “normative,” or as Nayoung Aimee Kwon has put it more precisely, “developmentalist” (433). He took Europe as the model for the modern literary mimetic and saw Japan and then Korea as the importers, if sometimes imperfect ones, of that achievement. Writing in 1940, Im defined “modern Korean literature” as writing that embodied “the modern spirit” in genres assumed from Western Europe but expressed in the Korean language. He traced modern literature as it was “transplanted” (*isik*) from Europe to Japan, and then Japan to Korea—not by Im’s generation, but by the earlier Yi In-jik (1862–1916) and Yi Kwang-Su (1896–1950)—a generation that Im declared in a 1939 newspaper essay “the remnants of a past now gone.” He proposed, in other words, that his own time was in only fragile possession of a mature literary modernity.

Im understood the consequences of this version of cultural history. “Im Hwa’s focus of critique is the lack of a modern national literature in the colony itself,” Nayoung Aimee Kwon writes,

The position of lack and belatedness occupied by colonial Korea in comparison to the standards of world literature maintained by seemingly cohesive and independent nation-states is a “shameful fact” [...] Im Hwa’s statements may be construed as subversively revolutionary in that he is implicitly critiquing the colonial context; yet insofar as he does not question the hierarchical logic of colonialism, but only Korea’s inferior place in it, his critique remains limited, trapped under the double bind of both Japanese and Western imperialism. (433)

Kwon is correct in identifying the “double bind” of what is termed, perhaps oxymoronicly, the “pro-Japanese nationalist” under colonialism—the place exactly where Im and others in his cohort found themselves. Everything would depend on unforeseeable events: Were Japan to win the war, Im and his circle might have been at the vanguard of a Korean intelligentsia promising their country a privileged position within a victorious empire. But as it in fact turned out, Japan lost and consequently so did that cohort’s gamble on the future.

### III. Poets of the North

During the war and briefly afterwards, Im would remain active in literary and cultural circles. He organized the first post-Liberation literary organization in Korea the very day after the Japanese surrender. At the time, his Headquarters for Literary Construction (*Munhak Geonseol Chonghobu*) consisted only of himself and no one else, but he quickly assumed a leadership role in the movement to build a much heralded but poorly defined “national [Korean] literature” (*minjok munhak*). Im was present at the famous colloquy of writers held at Seoul’s Phoenix Pavilion, the Bonghwanggak restaurant in December, 1945, where he engaged in “self-criticism” of his pre-Liberation behavior and, as a prerequisite for his “re-conversion,” used that critique of his former self as the starting point for a new literature (The literary critic Jung Baek-Soo has characterized Im’s language at this meeting as near “religious rhetoric” [237], which is of course the natural bombast of conversion). When Im would go on after the war to renounce his 1929 poem “Usan Badeun Yokkohamaeui Budu,” as he would anything in his pre-1945 life that suggested collaboration with the Japanese, that renunciation took the form of a transformative confession meant to provide the ground for a new, re-made and newly authentic “inner self” —the hallmark, it was once and perhaps still thought, of an authentically modern literature. There is some irony here. Im, who did not publish a confession of his ideological conversion in 1934, was making one now, after the war and performed in the Phoenix Hall. “The contribution that *cheonhyang* literature made to the history of modern Korean literature,” writes Kim Yun-Sik, “is that it broke new ground in the description of the inner self” (“KAPF Literature” 419). In December, 1945, Im was coming literally a bit late to the party, but finally made a declaration of a second change of heart public that he hoped would permit a third act in his career.

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His hopes to revive and refashion his career faltered, however, and Im Hwa found himself increasingly marginalized and criticized in postcolonial Korea. Tragically, his earlier reputation followed him. In late 1947 he fled across the 38th Parallel (*wolbuk*) and then, trapped in Cold War and Korean internecine politics probably none of his doing, was sentenced to death by a special military court in North Korea on August 6, 1953, after a three-day group trial for espionage—espionage both on behalf of Japan and the U.S. No accused collaborator (*chihilpa*) was meted a crueler fate, though others would share in his. In hindsight any even minimally sympathetic account of his life would surely have to be emplotted as a tragedy; but as we will see, that has not been the case, and for reasons that everything to do with the unfinished accounting of the peninsula under colonialism in both Koreas and Japan.

Since his execution Im Hwa, while certainly not ignored, has not been well served by scholarship (Watanabe 130). In 2007, Lee Kenji could say, in what is actually an exaggeration, that Im's existence was "obliterated" in the DPRK, and that literary historiography in the South declined to reference him at all:

For a long time Im Hwa has languished in obscurity. This doesn't just mean he was poor his whole life; in South Korea the works he left behind couldn't be read because he was a *wolbuk* (=communist) writer. And in North Korea, his entire existence was expunged. (177, 184–85)

In point of fact, in 1958 Pyongyang's Foreign Literature Press issued a Japanese-language history of post-1945 Korean literature (Shin Kigen's *Kaihōgo no Chōsen bungaku*) in which Im is anything but "erased"—on the contrary, he is cited as a reactionary, bourgeois writer whose presence in the North only stymied the efforts of fellow writers to build a socially realistic literature (Kawamura 167–68). But it is also true that for a long while, some South Korean literary historians, no more hospitable, would refer to Im as "Im *Kong*," or "Im *Zero*," putting his very name under a kind of disingenuous erasure. He and other such writers impugned with suspect politics were occasionally referred to as *silmyeong jakga*, or "writers who had forfeited their names" (Yamada 1267).

Im was hardly unique in this regard, of course. Over one hundred writers "went North," in what literary scholar Kwon Yeong-Min summarizes as principally three waves: the first made up of writers largely associated with the pre-1945 proletarian literature movement and who crossed the 38th

Parallel from late 1945 to mid-1946 and subsequently formed the core of the early North Korean literary establishment; a second wave in 1947–48, which included Im, comprised of those who fled out of fear from growing repression in the South; and the final third wave, writers who either voluntarily (*wolbuk*) or involuntarily (*nappuk*) went North after the outbreak of the Korean War in June, 1950 (18–19).

Why did they go? Surely many of us, were we in their place, would have done so as well. Some were demoralized by the viciousness of politics, which is to say the backstabbing, in the South's small literary circles. Others were convinced Marxists or socialists. Im was not a Party member himself, but he was surely discouraged when GHQ outlawed the Korean Communist Party (KCP). Not that any of the *wolbuk* writers could have known their move was permanent—briefly, during the Korean War, some like Im were able to travel to occupied parts of the south, but not for long.

The fate of many remains obscure. What these writers shared were their tragic, or at best uncertain fates: some, like Im, were executed, others simply purged for their bourgeois tendencies or the ilk. Others simply faded into various DPRK state apparatuses or disappeared entirely. Once the Korean War started, discussion of any of these writers was discouraged in the South, abetting our present ignorance of their fortunes.

South Korean interest in *wolbuk* writers grew in the 1970s along with interest in the fate of other Koreans who had gone “missing.” Democratization unleashed a wave of work on these writers, and in 1980 the Republic of Korea lifted the ban of the publication of their works. At least one *wolbuk* writer, Kim Sa-Ryang (1914–50), long denounced as a collaborator, has even been rehabilitated as an admirable *anti*-Japanese writer, largely on the basis of his 1946 travelogue about his escape from Japan-ruled colonial Korea to China the previous year, *A Old Horse's Long Journey* (Noma Malli), republished in the ROK in 1989. On June 25, 2012, more than sixty years after his death, Kim was honored with the designation of “Hero of the Republic” by the North Korean state (“Kin Shiryō ni”). And though Im Hwa remains officially taboo in the North for his treasons, at least that taboo is now explicitly stated, which means it can be potentially critiqued.

But in Japan, the country most responsible perhaps for the tortured life that Im lived in Korea, Japan, and finally the DPRK, the reputation of Im Hwa has remained largely unchanged among the public since the mid-1960s. It was in 1962–63 that a prolific and award-winning Japanese novelist known best for his



Fig. 1. *Poet of the North*

excellent mysteries, detective and crime stories, Matsumoto Seichō (1909–92), serialized a novel not a mystery at all and far from any of the “entertainment” pot-boilers he is deservedly famous for. *Poet of the North* (*Kita no Shijin* 1964) is the only full-length book in any genre, fiction or nonfiction, ever published about Im in Japan. In his well-regarded history of Japanese interventions into modern Korea, Peter Duus asserts that the Japanese produced no fiction “in which Koreans appeared as major characters” (400). This is demonstrably not true, but at the same time Matsumoto’s literary treatment of Im is indeed the only one we have in Japanese. It is a long biographical novel that appeared in installments for over a year in *Chūō kōron* (Central Forum) and which reviews events in 1946–48 Seoul from the point of view of Im Hwa. But the story begins with Im’s final ending: his execution in the North on the charges he spied both for the Japanese empire and then the U.S. It is also a work that uses the real names of the writers and politicians of the day, and for that reason among others the novel was then and to a lesser extent still today taken as a true account, though critics in Japan such as An U-Shik have identified the many inaccuracies and half-truths in it.

Matsumoto has a reputation in Japan in a mid- to low-brow writer, but that underestimates both his erudition and more artistic ambitions. He was

an amateur scholar his whole life, and he apparently somehow gained access to North Korean court records, some of which he embeds as documentary in *Poet of the North*. In my opinion, Matsumoto probably had other sources of information provided him by the DPRK, or by people sympathetic to it. But *Poet of the North* is not the work of a crude propagandist. It is just too literary for that, and Matsumoto too clever an author to do less. It is important to keep in mind that in the 1960s, North Korea enjoyed more support among the Japanese left than it does now, and America was viewed with greater suspicion. In some of his earlier novels, Matsumoto explored other conspiracies and seemed to believe in a number of them, such as the accusation that America maneuvered North and South Korea deliberately into war. In point of fact, Matsumoto was stationed in Seoul for the last two years of World War II, but learned no Korean and must have relied on help from others for what he relates in his novel about Im Hwa. For example, despite his lack of familiarity with the Korean language, he gets all the Korean names right and, in a telling detail, refers to Im himself as *Rimu* rather than *Imu*, a Japanization that reflects North Korean orthographic practice.

*Poet of the North* was severely criticized in South Korea when it was published in Japan, but in 1987 Miraesa published a Korean translation, just as the ban on *wolbuk* writers across the board was being lifted. I will summarize the story, skipping over Matsumoto's long digressions into Korean national and literary history. It opens in October, 1945, as Im is walking near central Seoul's Pagoda Park, the iconic site of colonial Korea's struggle against Japanese imperialism. He runs into an old labor activist, An Yeong-Dal, who operated underground under the Japanese occupation. They exchange news, about which Im is not entirely honest—he has, as Matsumoto writes, “a dark past” never confessed (12). This is a past, we learn soon, that Im would admit to years later at his trial in Pyongyang: ill and imprisoned by the Japanese, he had agreed in 1934 to abandon his radical politics and collaborate with the colonial regime. He had no choice, he later tells himself over and over. He would have died of his illness in jail, and at the time he had neither the stamina nor the means to go into exile in Shanghai, Moscow or the U.S. Opposing the regime in Japanese-ruled Korea was inconceivable to him, and so began his now lamentable twenty years of working with his country's illegitimate occupiers.

Im is facing a new crisis in the fall of 1945. An Yeong-Dal tells him that America—with which we later learn An has his own complicated, secret relationship—is bent on frustrating the Korean people's democratic aspirations.

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An says prominent writers such as Im must do something. There is a person, at this point unnamed, whom An wants Im to meet in a few days, and in the interim An works hard to recruit Im, but to just what Im is not quite sure. Im is plagued with guilty doubts over what he did during the colonial period, even as he prepares a speech he will soon deliver on the need to create a new, national and independent Korean literature. Why had he apostatized when he did? He asks himself. Because he was lonely, he recalls, and wanted the company of the many others in the Korean intelligentsia who were rallying to the Japanese cause. Here is where we might observe Matsumoto's infantilization of Im begins; peer pressure is a problem for adolescents, seldom for adults and especially rare for intellectuals who have already taken unpopular stances in their careers, as had Im.

Before Im ever meets An's mysterious person, he is summoned by American intelligence and interrogated, after being humiliated when he is de-loused with DDT. The Americans want to know Im's current activities, and whether he opposed the Japanese during the war. Im readily tells them of his work with the proletarian literature movement, his imprisonment, his poor health and the impossibility of resisting. When the Americans let him go, Im decides to keep his interrogation secret from all his Korean associates. Admitting it to his fellow writers might raise suspicions, and prompt questions of their own about what he did in the 1930s, specifically his discreet *tenkō*.

But it is not a secret to everyone. When the Americans summon Im again in November that year, he is brought face-to-face with a Japanese official who had been present in the room when Im apostatized, and who knows that Im subsequently spied for the Japanese. The Americans, a somewhat naive Im now realizes, know everything about him already. Matsumoto's portrait of Im by this point in *Poet of the North* is clearly that of a man whose past in not only catching up with him, but that of one who never stops rationalizing his choices to himself despite the growing realization that could, and surely should have, made other ones. Matsumoto's "Im Hwa," whatever the historical reality, comes across on the page as a coward with a fatally weak personality; no Japanese apostate of Im's generation has been similarly tarred in Japan's postwar literature.

The end of the Second World War did not mean the end of Im's anguish because his conscience, like his chronic tuberculosis, clings to him. Real independence for a Korea that major powers are dividing along the 38th parallel seems more and more elusive—there is talk of a joint protectorate

that will be imposed on the peninsula for years to come. An editor of the communist paper *Haebang Ilbo* asks Im to write a column about these plans for a protectorate, followed by more columns later. Im is flattered to be asked, but he never forgets his secret that, if exposed, would destroy him in a Korea now in flux but resolute in its contempt for intellectuals once allied with the Japanese.

As it turns out, the Americans, manipulating Seoul's communists, are pleased that Im's anti-protectorate columns are being published. The last thing the U.S. desires is a detente in which it cooperates with the Soviet Union. Just as in 1934, Im feels trapped in a quagmire of myriad contradictions and larger forces he neither understands nor controls. He grasps at a straw when he thinks: if I cooperate with the Americans, they will keep my shameful past buried. But suddenly the communists in the South, on orders from the USSR conveyed through Pyongyang, reverse their position and *support* the protectorate plan, precisely because any other arrangement would cede control of the South entirely to the U.S. Matsumoto's précis of the history of the period is quite nearly cartoonish, and risks rendering his protagonist a cut-out, but it sets the stage for the dramatic resolution of Im's predicament Matsumoto is leading us, however clumsily, toward.

American intelligence offers to return Im's handwritten *tenkō* document to him if he'll hand over the organizational charts to all the cultural organizations he belongs to. They also look the other way when Im somehow gains access to American-made medicine for his respiratory ailment. For the first time in decades Im's debilitating health rallies. Eventually he does get ahold of his *tenkō* papers, which he promptly burns. But he experiences no relief, for now he realizes he is collaborating with the Americans just as fully as he had once with the Japanese. "The problem," Matsumoto writes, "is not the contents of the [organizational chart] documents. Their value was in his having turned them over to his [American] associates" (191).

It soon becomes clearer to Im that the U.S. is going to move aggressively against the left in the South. On the one hand, the situation now seems revolutionary in a way he never could have imagined during the Japanese interregnum. But what could his role ever be in a revolution today, with *his* sullied past? For the first time Im starts to think about the North, a place he's never been but whose tall mountains have always been part of his poetic imagination—a remark that surely Matsumoto intended to demonstrate his character Im's callowness, if not silliness. But no, Im decides, he can't go—he's

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a man with a clandestine past. And worse, the communists with whom he associates in Seoul are, belatedly it dawns on him, already infiltrated by Americans at the highest level.

As strikes and other labor unrest spread throughout the South, the Americans arrest more and more people, but so far Im is spared. He darkly wonders why. His health declines once his supply of American-made medicine is interrupted. But after a massacre of striking workers in Taegu,<sup>4</sup> the incident drives Im to resolve to write something urging his fellow Koreans to take revolutionary action. Soon, however, his American masters summon him again and, as his supply of necessary medicine is restored, he is instructed he must hand over the names of all party members in the employ of the U.S. military in Korea. Im cannot afford to be arrested himself—he'll die in prison, he tells himself, resorting to the same line of thinking he indulged in in the 1930s. And to make things more complicated still, Im reasons that highly placed leftists he suspects are in the employ of the U.S. are simply stringing the Americans along, feeding them bits of useless information, all the while passing what they learn on to the North. In early 1947 the authorities take Im to the Seodaemun police station for detailed questioning. He is put in a crowded cell with common thieves and rapists, and his vanity is offended. Anyone could be responsible for his being confined here, nefarious forces on the right or his "friends" on the left. Indeed, when he is released it is through the intercession of someone Im thought was an agent from the North but is revealed in fact to be a spy for the police. While detained, leaders on the left have fled north, and Im knows his time as a person at liberty in Seoul is coming to an end. He does not want to cross the border—his precarious health would never survive the harsher climate there, he tells himself. But now even some Americans are advising him to go since his freedom in the South will be permanently rescinded soon. And so, on a cold night that November, a guide leads him across the 38th Parallel.

In the final forty pages of *Poet of the North*, we read how Im Hwa was put on trial in the DPRK shortly after the 1953 armistice in the Korean War. Matsumoto quotes from the official indictment: Im is accused, among other things, of disbanding KAPF, of serving as an official in Japanese-front organizations, of campaigning for the *Naisen-ittai* 'integration of Japan and

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4. The "Taegu Incident" is referred in Korean historiography as the "Taegu 10.1 Incident" of October 1, 1946.

Korea, of working as a spy for the U.S. after Liberation, and of continuing to spy for the Americans in the North and then again in DPRK-occupied Seoul. Matsumoto presents all of these charges without authorial comment or prejudice: indeed, the whole of the novel leads readers to think these charges warranted, if unleavened with any sympathy for the predicament intellectuals such as Im faced during the occupation of Korea first by Japan, and then the U.S.

In his courtroom defense, Im concedes his treasonous behavior under the Japanese but insists he was coerced. He further admits to working for the Americans starting in December, 1945, and continuing his work for them in Pyongyang and later when he briefly returned to Seoul during the Korean War. For these crimes, Im and the others with him on trial on similar charges are all sentenced to death. It is there, with the dry records of a special military court, that *Poet of the North* concludes, without comment by Matsumoto, but none is necessary: his novel has, over the spread of its dense 350 pages, has already convicted Im.

Today, with the passage of time and perhaps better information, few critics of the novel think Im Hwa was ever a spy for the U.S., and fewer still have as harsh an opinion of the *chinilpa* Korean intellectuals who collaborated with the Japanese. But that is not the principal problem with Matsumoto's narrative, which revolves so crucially around Im Hwa's fear that his "secret"—his 1934 *tenkō* ideological apostasy—would be revealed. While it is true that Im never, as did others, published his apostasy for public consumption, it was hardly ever a wholly confidential affair. For example, in the July, 1940, issue of the Japanese magazine *Bungei*, fellow writer and collaborator Baek Cheol, after noting that nearly all Korean writers followed their Tokyo colleagues into political recantation, observes that there was Im Hwa one day among them, never having publically announced a *tenkō* but suddenly a "citizen of literary society" with full ranks and privileges, "toiling in the fields of pure literature," i.e., literature without social or partisan ambition (217–20). It is clear what Baek means to say—that Im Hwa is a fellow apostate along with the rest of them. Matsumoto's novel, which did much to damn Im Hwa among readers in 1960s Japan, makes an accusation easily demonstrated to be misleading. Or more to the point, needless: surely Im Hwa's conscience could be troubled by an "ideological conversion," whether it was sworn in secret or not. With only a few exceptions, this was certainly true among Japanese intellectuals after the war. Matsumoto's purposes here seem to be more, surely, about America's culpabilities at a time—the 1960s—when Japan's cast role in the

Cold War as America's own steadfast "collaborator" chafed many intellectuals of Matsumoto's political ilk.

It is unclear to me why Matsumoto tells the story of Im Hwa in just the fashion he does, but in retrospect it is surely a cruel depiction of a life already corrupted by the history of Japanese intercession in modern Korea, including among its most talented and promising writers. The problem of collaboration in the twentieth century, perhaps especially that of Koreans with the Japanese, was already an extremely complex story before Matsumoto turned to it and more complicated with his assertion in *Poet of the North* that Im Hwa served the U.S., the second of his country's nation occupiers in the last century. (It may be important to remember that Japan had been occupied by America, too, and that Japanese collaboration with the U.S. in 1945–52 was an unspoken controversy when Matsumoto wrote, as it is still today.) In any case it does no service to condemn, without nuance, any leading colonial-period writer, including Im Hwa; especially since the history of twentieth-century collaboration, has yet to be written beyond pathetic caricatures of traitors and patriots.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

Finally, it is only Im Hwa the collaborator in whom Matsumoto is interested. Nowhere in *Poet of the North* does the reader learn anything about what kind of writer Im Hwa, what his achievements were and what his literary legacy might be. But allow me to be more critical. Matsumoto, who was rightly renowned for mystery and detective novels that explored the psychological depths of criminals and their pursuers, presents us with a flat, parodic portrait of Im Hwa, not much more than that of a debilitated, frightened, traumatized survivor of his past (as imagined as real?), and a past hardly plumbed for Japan's own responsibility for it. The truth is that postwar Japan has never produced a novel about any twentieth-century Korean writer we can say does justice to him or her. Adept at narrating its own victimhood, Japan's literary talents fall short at accounting accurately and sympathetically for its own victims, certainly not those among a colonial intelligentsia it alternatively seduced and punished with its own imperial ambitions in mind.

Who can doubt that American intelligence in post-Liberation Korea recruited agents, even if Im Hwa is not now believed to be among them? That's what intelligence services do, after all, and the stakes for the postwar world

order were high. Criticizing Matsumoto for saying Im served America is not to mitigate any criticism we might rightly reserve for America; that blame has its own, well-documented novels, American and British ones prominent among them. Im Hwa before and after Japan is an Im Hwa who has suffered Japanese humiliation at least twice, in the real world of imperial Japan, and the fictional, perhaps very fictional, postwar world of a Japan with much to explain about its colonial past, but which has not. All of this is in keeping with the overall, and in my view stupefying, failure of postwar Japanese literature to confront the nature, even existence, of in Japan's own perfidy in the first half of the twentieth century.

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Fig. 1: *Poet of the North*, book cover.

## Abstract

Im Hwa (林和)—pioneer poet, critic and literary historian as well as reviled collaborator and accused spy—is one of the prominent colonial-period authors whose careers remain controversial because twentieth-century Korean history itself still is. Although a *wolbuk* (越北) writer whose work languished under erasure until post-Park Chung-Hee democratization in the ROK, critical reading of Im in neither the North nor the South halted entirely after his Pyongyang mass show-trial and execution in 1953. Building on early work by Kim Yun-Sik (金允植) in the ROK, Ōmura Masuo (大村益夫) in Japan, and many younger scholars in the U.S., my contribution within my larger project on pro-Japan Korean intellectuals under Japanese rule, is the history of Im's reception in postwar Japan, where the legacies of *shinnichilchinil* (親日) writers animate their own involved, ongoing anxieties over the unresolved historical consensus of the empire's record of voluntary and involuntary complicity. I focus on Matsumoto Seichō's (松本清張, 1962–63) biographical novel of Im, *Poet of the North* (Kita no shijin, 北の詩人). Instrumental in propagating a far from disinterested portrait of Im that still circulates in Japan fifty years after its publication, *Poet of the North* is evidence of how one writer's reputation, already distorted by a lifetime spent initially under imperialism and then Stalinism, continues to be manipulated in Japan amid combined colonial revisionism and Cold War politics.

**Keywords:** Im Hwa, Matsumoto Seichō, Japanese empire, collaboration, *Poet of the North*, Kita no shijin

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