

# **The Inflow of Western Knowledge and the Process of Internalization: Comparison of *The Grass Roof* and *Der Yalu Fliesst***

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The purpose of this study is to ascertain the differences between the inflow of Western knowledge and the process of its internalization as seen in *The Grass Roof* (Younghill Kang 1931) and *Der Yalu Fliesst* (Mirok Li 1946). These two works were considered leaders for a long time because they were published in English and German.

The main point of this work, which is internalization and the acquirement of Western knowledge, is to show the differences among people, especially the difference between Younghill Kang's Han Chungpa and Mirok Li's narrator of Li Mirok. These two characters show the differences in comprehension of Western education, learning methods of Western knowledge, and the process of looking at the West.

Their acts cause another kind of colonialism which is ironic and they are criticized as strengthening Orientalism in the West. But at the point that we overcame the obstacle of human species and languages, Younghill Kang's and Mirok Li's works should be acknowledged that they informed about modern Korea which disappeared by the over-use of foreign languages. They were the writers who showed that the nation was alive although their country was broken.

Keywords : Younghill Kang, Mirok Li, *The Grass Roof*, *Der Yalu Fliesst*, western knowledge, traditional knowledge, internalization, reorganization of knowledge

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## Introduction

Younghill Kang's *The Grass Roof* (1931) and Mirok Li's *Der Yalu Fliesst* (1946) are autobiographical novels published in America and Germany. These two works show the protagonists' conflicts and their mental growth because they are coming-of-age works and an understanding of the atmosphere around the characters (Han Yong Hwan 1992: 241). The main characters, Han Chungpa and Li Mirok, are telling their stories from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to right after the March 1<sup>st</sup> Independence Movement. People who lived during those times experienced confusion about the terms Western, Europe and Occident and felt a loss and uneasiness about the strict colonial rule. These two works had many more readers outside of Korea than inside. Research of the journal *Samcheolli* (Kwon Yeong Min 1982: 106-22)<sup>1</sup> explained that they could not be considered Korean literature because they were written in a foreign language although they were about Korea and written by Koreans. Thus these two writers were outsiders to the Korean literary community for a long time. In this situation, it is understandable that there was not a demand by Korean readers and this resulted in a delayed publication of these works in Korea.<sup>2</sup> Interest in Younghill Kang and Mirok Li is rising with recent research into Korean-community literature. It is appropriate to expand the study of Korean literature to include Korean-community literature.

The purpose of this study is to find the differences between the inflow of Western knowledge and the process of its internalization that can be seen in *The Grass Roof* and *Der Yalu Fliesst*. These two works are ethnographic<sup>3</sup> in nature since they show Korean culture and the identity (Choi Yun Yeong 2006) of Korean people to the West. When reading these books, one can see the symptoms of modern Korea that developed from heterogeneity. The characters in these works internalized the modern and showed their break of consciousness related to Japan's annexation of Joseon, the March 1<sup>st</sup> Independence Movement, the fall of Joseon, and their relocation to the West.

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1. The writers of Lee Kwang-su, Park Yeong Hui, and Yeom Sang Seop suggested *Sogmunjuui*.

2. Part One of *The Grass Roof* was translated by Kim Seong Chil in 1947. *Der Yalu Fliesst* was translated by Jeon Hye Rin in 1959.

3. See Pyo Eon Bok (1997), Jo Gyu Ik (1999), Yun Byeong Ro (1998), Kim Hyeon Taek Oe (2001), Kim Jong Hoe (2003), Hong Gyeong Pyo (2002), Yu Seon Mo (2001), Kwon Hyeok Gyeong and Lim Jin Hui (1998), Ko Bu Eung (2003), and Kim Uk Dong (2004).

The difference between Han Chungpa and the narrator of *Mirok Li* is their comprehension of Western education, the learning methods of Western knowledge, and the process of looking at the West. While the existing materials stress the valuation about the inflow of Western knowledge, this article is focused on the reaction process of the subjects of those days to the inflow of Western knowledge. The acceptive process of Western knowledge revealed from the comparative discussion of the two works is good material to see the modernization of Korea.

## Modern Korea and Two Writers

When a nation and its people are in a time of crisis, individuals must deal with the problem of how to live (Lim Seon-ae 2005). This is also an important topic in history. Koreans who lived under Japanese colonization often went to America and Europe to avoid Japanese cruelty. Some willingly or not willingly cooperated with the Japanese colonial policy and volunteered to become Japanese while others lost their lives resisting Japan. Younghill Kang and *Mirok Li* chose to leave Korea for America and Germany.

After the opening of Joseon ports, the theory of modernism was limited to a minor intellectual theory since modernization equaled Westernization, but its range of comprehension extended after the Gabo Reform of 1894. Japan's victory in the Sino-Japanese War became its chance to become the center of Asia. The Joseon dynasty began to collapse since they were surrounded by Western countries, Japan, China, and Russia. The theory about Western culture was produced by scholars, foreigners, and missionaries, but there were many problems in its speed and accuracy. The consciousness has changed that Western culture is great that works as a universal fact.

After the signing of the Eulsa Treaty (1905) and Japan's annexation of Joseon (1910), the hope of building a nation disappeared and the meeting of Western culture became possible only through Japanese interpretation. Joseon people were controlled by a colonial government at a time when they began to be curious about the West. Some intellectuals felt limited by translated Western knowledge and tried to find its origin, but movement from one country to another was difficult for people who had lost their nation. They went to the West, but they had a hard time because of language and race. Younghill Kang and *Mirok Li* are authors who overcame the language barriers and restored modern Korea

which had disappeared by writing about Korean in English and German.

Younghill Kang was born in Hongwon, South Hamgyeong Province and went to America right after the March 1<sup>st</sup> Independence Movement in 1919. He studied medicine at Boston University and also majored in American-British literature at Harvard University. He came to the attention of the American literary community with his publications of *The Grass Roof* (1931), *The Happy Grove* (1934), and *East Goes West* (1937). After that he lectured about English literature and comparative literature in America and Europe. After 1945 he lectured at Seoul University for some time. He also wrote *A World of Great Stories*, *Thesaurus of Book Digests*, and *Outline of American History* which informed Americans about Korean culture.

Mirok Li was born in Haeju, Hwanghae Province. He went to Germany around the same time as Younghill Kang went to America and enrolled in Wurzburg Medical University. But he stopped studying because of his bad health. He then moved to Munich University in 1925 where he majored in zoology and obtained a doctorate in 1928. He became a published author in 1931 with *The Night of Korean Alley*, and he came to the attention of the German literary world by publishing *SUAM und MIROK* (1935) and *Der Yalu Fliesst* (1946). From 1948 to 1950, he lectured about Korean, Chinese, and Japanese literature at Munich University in the Oriental Studies Department. He died in 1950.

Younghill Kang and Mirok Li were considered outsiders of the Korean literary community for a long time, but interest has been rising because of new cultural research of the Korean community. The study about Younghill Kang is discussed by scholars of Anglo-American literature and Korean literature.<sup>4</sup> In America, he is discussed as an American of Korean descent, and in Korea as part of Korean American literature. *The Grass Roof* was awarded the Book of the Century and Guggenheim when it was published. It had the spotlight of the critics as it made the trend of multiculturalism and the boom of the literary study of minority races in the American literary world. In Korea, his name is discussed in the field of American literature and Korean American literature by American and Korean literature researchers. Studies about Mirok Li have been done in Korea and Germany. Some parts of *Der Yalu Fliesst* are printed in German textbooks. In Korea he is studied by researchers of German literature (Yu Jin Cheon 1996; Jeong Gyu Hwa 1997; Jeong Gyu Hwa 1998; Choi Yun Yeong 2006) and

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4. See footnote #3.

Korean literature (Lim Seon-ae 2006a, 2006b). These works are a basis to strengthen Orientalism, but we also have to acknowledge that it informs the whole world about the injustices of Japanese colonization.

## The Inflow of Western Knowledge and the Process of Internalization

What kind of images about the West have come to us? Information about the West has been produced by envoys to China, foreign missionaries, intellectuals, and scholars.

Wes in dieser Schule gelehrt wurde, schien höchst seltsam zu sein. Es hieß, die Kinder würden dort weder in den Klassikern noch im schönschreiben, noch in der Dichtung unterrichtet, sondern in ganz neuartigen Wissenschaften, die man von einem neuen Erdteil eingeführt habe, den man “Westlich des Ozeans” oder “europa” nannte. Wo dieser Erdteil wirklich lag und was seine Wissenschaften waren, wußte man nicht genau. Manche sagten, daß man in dieser Schule hohe Rechenkünste und schwierige Zaubereien lerne, manche sprachen sogar von Erd- und Himmelskunde.<sup>5</sup> (German version, p. 71)

The above quote is from *Der Yalu Fließt* where the narrator Mirok describes the Western school. The information has the nature of rumor, so the subject of the speech is “somebody.” The uncertainty of the subject of the information production causes uncertainty of information in this case like the subject of the information production has anonymity. The quote shows how the information delivery is accomplished. After the opening of Joseon ports in 1876, Joseon began to modernize. But Joseon starts to break down when the people resist

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5. “The subjects taught there sounded odd. It was rumored that the pupils learned neither the classics, nor script-writing, nor even poetry, but altogether newfangled sciences introduced from a distant continent named “West of the Ocean” or Europe. Where this continent was situated or what exactly was its science nobody seemed to have any clear notion. Some said that the school taught advanced arithmetic and obscure occult arts, others even spoke of the science of the earth and the heavens: all were afraid that it would undo and corrupt the children because they would not learn the classics” (English version, pp. 60-1).

Westernization. The government tried to understand the West by sending scholars but it went to distortion. Joseon, knowing nothing about the minute plan, spent all its time accepting Western culture's rights or wrongs.

*The Grass Roof* and *Der Yalu Fliesst* are the real text that shows the symptoms of modern Korea. We can see the aspect of conflict between the protagonists and the friction and trouble of education between modern and pre-modern. And we can also find that the inflow of Western knowledge and the process of internalization progressed not with homogeneity but with heterogeneity. The people in these two works show the difference of confronting the problem, how they acquire Western knowledge, and how they recognize it.

### 1. Understanding Western Education

Chungpa and Mirok, the main characters of *The Grass Roof* and *Der Yalu Fliesst*, spend their childhood learning Confucianism. Chungpa acquires knowledge from his uncles and schoolmasters while Mirok acquires it from schoolmasters and his father. While both were taught traditional knowledge, the two characters show a salient difference in dealing with the inflow of Western knowledge. Han Chungpa in *The Grass Roof* admires Western schools, but the characters around him think negatively about them. Chungpa's grandmother considers Western schools as places where the children of a butcher go. Moreover she ignores Chungpa's curiosity about them. The building of Western schools was one of the issues that caused scholars' repulsion. Scholars who think of education as a way to maintain the order of Confucianism gave value to it.

They did not acknowledge that Western education which gives the priority to practice. So the students of Western education are children except for the modern nobility. The negative consciousness was already settled down as the result of the people's trust in education. Chungpa enrolls at a Western school at the age of 9 and lives in a dormitory. Before the end of the term, Chungpa's father makes him quit school under the reason of his becoming an invaluable person like his rude friends and becoming too close with the Japanese. Because his father requires it, Chungpa is taught at a Korean school, but it makes him so bored. He already has an interest in the West and Japan. He has positive images of the West and Japan. From that point on, there is a conflict between him and his father which was really a problem of modern versus pre-modern.

The problem between Han Chungpa and his father shows the salient difference with *Der Yalu Fliesst*. First, unlike Chungpa's father, Mirok's father is a

modernized person and he shows a positive attitude toward Western education. There are also differences between their social statuses. Chungpa's father is the child of nobility but now lives a poor life. However, Mirok's father is the child of nobility who holds an office and lives a rich life. Mirok's father takes his son to the "new school" (western style school) when Mirok is eleven and provides feedback to his son about the knowledge he learns at school. Compared with his father's passion, Mirok shows less interest in Western schools since he does not "want to be ruined because he is the only son." This is a distinct difference to Chungpa in *The Grass Roof*. Chungpa is a person who does not give up his desires for a Western education in spite of his father's objection. However, Mirok is described as a person who is afraid of Western education in spite of his father's encouragement.

Chungpa acquires Western knowledge even though he has many difficulties with those around him not understanding his desire for Western education. Mirok stops wanting to learn despite his father's help, but eventually he achieves Western knowledge. From these two stories, Western education is sometimes accommodated and sometimes excluded against traditional education. Japan started to control and to regulate the colonists by introducing Western education which made it easier to rule. People who are not colonists came to the situation to follow the new education system instead of traditional education.

## 2. The Way to Acquire Western Education

There are differences between Chungpa and Mirok's methods of acquiring Western knowledge. In the case of Chungpa, it starts from self-denial. He realizes the importance and necessity of Western knowledge after meeting a teacher by the name of Park Susan who was a national activist.

The old Confucian school receded to the past, in my mind. It seemed to me more and more useless, as a bull-fight or a game of contract bridge, since I began to learn the law of gravitation, and Boyle's law and the other laws. The study of the lives of Lincoln and Napoleon, and the geography of the World kindled my enthusiasm until sometimes I seemed just to be dazzled by stars in the head. (English version, p. 187)

The more Chungpa studies Western knowledge, the more he admires it. At the age of eleven he enrolls in a high school in Seoul to acquire more Western

knowledge. He enters his school after passing exams in math, history, Japanese grammar, Japanese writing, Japanese speech and the basics of Chinese writing. The basic principle of the school is to make the person sincere and loyal to the Japanese Emperor. So it could not satisfy Chungpa's admiration for Western knowledge. He decides to go to America with the distortion of Korean history as a motivating factor. He asks a missionary in Seoul to take him to America but the missionary refuses because Chungpa is not a Christian. After his failed attempt to go to America, he thinks of Japan as "a shortcut to Western learning" (p. 237) and goes to Japan full of expectations that Western knowledge will be handed down properly. At that time, Japan was the center of Asian knowledge, so scholars from China, India, and Siam came to study Western literature translated by Japan. The narrative states that he read not only about Shakespeare, Carlyle, Emerson, Ruskin, Tennyson, and Browning but also Darwin and Schopenhauer. After he returns to Korea, he enrolls in a mission high school for the purpose of gaining entrance into an American university. He learns English by reading the writings of Shakespeare, Carlyle, and Emerson.

The distinct awareness to a goal is shown in the narrative. He is described as a passionate character (Lim Seon-ae 2004). When young, his dream was to be a doctor of Joseon and it changed into a doctor of America with the loss of his national rights. His goal is persuasive because the acquirement of Western knowledge had the same meaning as the guarantee of building a strong nation at that time. But this is ironic that choosing America for freedom from Japanese colony meant becoming a new colony of America (Lim Seon-ae 2006b).

Unlike Chungpa who abandoned traditional knowledge for Western knowledge, Mirok still respects traditional knowledge which he acquired long ago. Unlike Chungpa he has difficulty acquiring Western knowledge. He also has difficulties with Japanese. Western schools are a burden to him. With the help of his friends, he is able to learn Western knowledge, but he finally reaches a point where it is too difficult to understand it. His mother who sees her son's pain tells him to quit school. She persuades him with words like "We don't fit in that awkward culture." Resting in the countryside after he quits the Western school, his admiration for Europe begins. He thinks European local education is needed to be a real cultured man. He tries to go to Europe but he fails because of his young age.

Mirok shows a passion for acquiring Western knowledge through his enrollment in a medical school at Seoul which as famous as the great schools of Europe. He eventually enters this school and studies medicine. The way to acquire Western knowledge, Chungpa solves it alone, while Mirok does it with

the help of people around him.

### 3. A Course to Finding the Western

Chungpa and Mirok leave for America and Germany. They consider them the origin of Western knowledge. The two characters have different reasons for leaving Korea as are their processes of finding the origins of Western knowledge. Park Susan spearheads the independence movement. His sermon acts as an important chance to decide young Han Chungpa's future.

Any who could must make their way to America. Others must go by the help of patriotic private citizens who yet had the means in hand. What glamour he cast over the great colleges in America, which held all that the West had ever thought or known, and the latest means for giving it in the diploma packet by the wholesale. An American education was for the few, he preached; those few would reap the scholar's future prominence lay toward America like the shortest distance between two points . . . in a straight line. (English version, p. 186)

From the narrative, Park Susan seems like a person related with the independence movement activists in America. His positive feeling to America originates from "Yeonmi Theory" in *Joseonchaeknyak* (about 1880) written by Hwang Junheon. But the real facts are different. Actually America supported the Japanese Emperor's colonial policy in Korea since 1882 even though they pretended to stand neutral in public. The expectation that they would help Korea when Korea encountered danger was Korea's misunderstanding. When the independence activists lost their nation after Japan's annexation of Korea in 1910, they tried their best for the nation's independence. Seen from the narrative, Park Susan seems like a character living inside Korea to progress the independence movement. The awareness that Western knowledge is the key to the nation's independence was the main slogan from the characters of the new style fiction in the age of enlightenment. And it continued with the character Park Susan living in the time of Japanese imperialism.

Park Susan's speech so moves Chungpa that he changes his life goal to going to America. When he fails to go to America because he is Korean, Han Chungpa asks a missionary to help him, but he refuses. He learns about America during his life in Japan but he returns to Korea with the realization that America which

Japan taught about is not the real America. During that time he goes to jail because of his involvement in the March 1<sup>st</sup> Independence Movement, and eventually he leaves for America with the help of an American.

Chungpa is interested in America because of Park Susan, while Mirok is interested in Europe because of his close friends. Chungpa admires America for his country's independence, and Mirok admires Europe as the real intellectual. Mirok is a passive character that follows his friends' and father's admiration of Europe. Mirok tries to go to Europe but he fails. He is involved in the March 1<sup>st</sup> Independence Movement while studying at a medical university. Japanese police follow him and his father asks him to hide in Germany. Han Chungpa in *The Grass Roof* is an active character but Mirok Li is a passive character affected by people around him. They are different in many ways, but they are sure to be people who symbolize Koreans who experienced the break of consciousness and submission. Younghill Kang and Mirok Li show distinct symptoms of Korean modernism through the technique of recollection.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to show the differences between the inflow of Western knowledge and the process of internalization as seen in *The Grass Roof* and *Der Yalu Fließt*. These two works were considered leaders for a long time according to their publication in English and German. But these days, the importance of these two works is newly understood as they are the cultural heritage of the Korean community. These two works are praised abroad as works that show Korean lyricism and great description. As already disclosed, these two works are important products which inform about Korean culture and its national identity.

But to read these two works microscopically, we can see the symptoms of modern Korea that developed from heterogeneity. People in these works internalized the modern by showing the break of consciousness related to Japan's annexation of Joseon, the March 1<sup>st</sup> Independence Movement, the fall of Joseon, and visiting the West. The main point of this work, which is internalization and acquirement of Western knowledge, is progressed with showing the differences among people. Especially the difference between Han Chungpa and the narrator of Li Mirok shows the difference toward the comprehension of Western education, the learning method for Western knowledge, and the process of looking at the West.

Like the two main characters, people who are taught using modern education admit the superiority of Western knowledge transcendently. They are looking for Western knowledge which is not translated but original. Their acts cause another colonialism which is ironic and they are criticized as they work to strengthen Orientalism. But at the point that we overcame the obstacle of human species and languages, Younghill Kang's and Mirok Li's works should be acknowledged that they informed about modern Korea which disappeared by the overuse of foreign languages. It is sure that they are writers who showed that the nation is alive even though their country was broken down.

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