Contrast in Space and Characters: Han Sŏr-ya's Counter-Censorship Strategies in the Newspaper Serial, Hwanghon (Dusk, 1936)

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ABSTRACT

The novel Hwanghon (Dusk) by leftist writer Han Sŏr-ya (1900–1976) portrays the dramatic transformation of a country girl into a revolutionary worker in Korea. Another aspect of the drama, one that reflects the context of its different editions, is the story of the novel’s revision.

This paper compares the original censored text, published in 1936 as a newspaper serial, and the revised 1955 text, which removed “unsatisfactory” expressions and reflected the North’s post-liberation politics. Examining the 1936 version, I argue that Han deliberately disrupted the regular serialization schedule by skipping days in order to disguise subversive themes and to confound the censor’s memory. The articulation of those scenes, especially the rise of revolutionary workers, is significantly enhanced by Han’s uses of space and characters. By setting up contrasts among his characters, and weaving them into spatial confrontations, Han not only evokes socialist themes, but also creates a multidimensional presence for them that frustrates attempts to locate them in a single source.

Keywords: Han Sŏr-ya, Hwanghon, colonial censorship, counter-censorship strategies, newspaper serialization, fictional space, characterization

Introduction

Han Sŏr-ya (Han Pyŏng-do, 1900-1976, Sŏr-ya is his penname; hereafter Han Sŏr-ya) is one of the most influential leftist writers in modern Korean literature, including both North and South Korea. In the 1920s, Han led anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist literary movements by participating in the KAPF (Korean Federation of Proletarian Artists). Despite the Japanese police’s violent crackdown on this politico-literary organization in the 1930s, Han never relinquished his socialist views. After liberation in 1945, Han traveled to North Korea and began to realize his proletarian ideals by helping to construct a North Korean literature (Sŏ 1999, 89-94).1

Hwanghon (Dusk, 1936; hereafter Dusk) is Han Sŏr-ya’s first full-length novel, which Han himself revised in North Korea in 1955. The novel articulates the author’s conviction that workers are vital agents in creating a politically and economically egalitarian society through the plotline of the dismissal of factory employees after mechanized production leads to layoffs. Alongside Kang Kyŏng-ae’s In’gan munje (Human predicaments, 1934) and Yi Ki-yŏng’s Kohyang (Hometown, 1933-1934), novels which also focus on national identity conflict and class
struggle, literary critics often laud Han’s novel as one of the three masterworks of the 1930s. These three works testify to the spirit of resistance in the 1930s, when Japan expanded aggressively into Manchuria, tightened its grip on politically non-conformist thought through censorship, and produced a flourishing of chōnhyang munin—writers who recanted their radical ideology under pressure from the colonial state.

A recent surge in censorship studies in Korea has contributed to deepening our understanding of the colonial production of texts. In particular, it has revealed the complicated negotiations between writers and censors through carefully organized surveillance that took place not only when a manuscript was submitted for publication in a periodical, but also when the printed article was republished in a book. Such publication environments under the colonial censorship regime have been characterized into three areas: the establishment of the censoring subjects, such as the Japanese thought police, book department, censors, and translators and the systematization of the work of these agents (Chŏng and Ch’oe 2006); the means of control, both textual and non-textual, over books and periodicals (Han 2006a; Han 2009); and text producers’ responses to censorship, especially counter-censorship strategies, which often resulted in enhancing the artistic refinement of their works (Ch’oe 2001; Han 2006b). By nature, censorship studies evoke interdisciplinary research in various fields of literature, sociology, and journalism. Including the fruitful outcomes of previous research, such collaborative efforts have recently produced anthologized books, which extend the scope of colonial censorship scholarship to expressive media other than print, such as fine arts, film, music, and plays, and to comparative studies with Taiwan (Tongguk Taehakkyo, 2010; Kömnyŏl Yŏng’uhoe, 2011).

My paper falls into the third subcategory of censorship studies in Korea, which centers on the reinterpretation of literary works in the presence of censors. Studies on counter-censorship strategies have thus far focused on the subversive potentials of particular characterizations, such as of the disabled, and ways of circumventing the use of dangerous words and phrases in short stories. In regard to the issue of “colonial writers strike back,” Han Sŏr-ya’s case is intriguing for several reasons. His Dusk is not a short story, but a full-length novel, and it was serialized in a newspaper, the Chosŏn ilbo (The Chosŏn daily), over a considerable time—from February 5 to October 28, 1936 (a period of nine months). It does not carry visibly distinctive characters, such as a disabled person, and does not show many marks of deletion, for instance, fuseji (concealing letters) like “XX” and “OO” and pyŏkdol munja (brick letters) or the marks of upside-down metal types, such as “˥˩˥.”

In brief, my project concerns the counter-censorship strategies of the newspaper serial Dusk. Two questions about Han Sŏr-ya’s strategies will be addressed specifically in this paper: How did Han utilize serialization itself as a way of circumventing the keen, omnipresent eyes of censors? And, in order to

1 It is commonly believed that Han Sŏr-ya was purged in North Korea in August 1962. However, Kim Chae-yong suggests that the political purge does not imply Han’s physical death. Kim argues that Han died in 1976; 1962 simply marks the end of Han’s production of literary works (Kim 1999, 229).