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Introduction

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Introduction

By Kevin Michael Smith

O Chang-hwan's poetry oeuvre is a rare gemstone in the history of modern Korean literature. Overshadowed by his contemporaries (luminaries such as idyllic poet Paek Sök, the influential poet-theorist Kim Ki-rim, and the beloved lyricist Yun Tong-ju), O has yet to receive the full critical appreciation he deserves, whether in Korean or English-language scholarship. His knack for simile, his extensive lexicon, and his youthful precociousness shine through at every turn of phrase in his limited but refined body of work. Successful in every style he attempted, O moved from initial experiments with the avant-garde, drawing inspiration from futurism and dada, to a mature, pessimistic blend of romanticism and decadence, before his short-lived conversion to socialist realism in the postliberation period.

O was born on May 15, 1918, in the village of Poŭn, North Ch'ungch'öng Province, where a memorial hall commemorating his literary accomplishments now stands on the site of his childhood home. The illegitimate son of a propertied *yangban* (nobleman) father and concubine mother, O would, as evident in poems such as "Family Pedigree" (*Söngssibo*), forever resent the feudal Confucian customs that continued to hold sway over many aspects of social life well into the Japanese colonial period (1910–1945), barring him and countless others from the full rights accorded to proper

familial heirs. O attended the prestigious Whimoon High School in Kyōngsŏng (present-day Seoul) in 1931, where he embarked on his literary career with the encouragement of mentor Chŏng Chi-yong, before withdrawing to complete his diploma in Tokyo in 1935. He then briefly entered Meiji University in Tokyo in 1937, but returned to colonial Chosŏn the following year to run a bookstore in Chongno named “Namman” (Southern barbarian). By that time, he was already fully established on the Korean literary stage with publication of his first complete collection, *Castle Wall* (Sŏngbyŏk, 1937), after a stunning debut with such poems as “Camera Room” (1934) and “Capital City” (*Subu*, 1936).

His literary education was steeped in the Chinese classics, befitting his *yangban* background, but he cultivated an appetite for cutting-edge, modernist styles, undoubtedly accentuated by his stint in Tokyo, and a genuine mastery over the delicate nuances of the Korean colloquial language. Thanks to the recent discovery by Fukuoka-based research professor Kumaki Tsutomu, we now know that O tried his hand at writing in Japanese as well, as evidenced by his minor but endearing contributions featured across four issues of the journal *Nihon sidan* (Japanese poetry) from 1934–1935, two of which are translated below.¹

During the years 1933–1934, O was busy absorbing modernist impulses from across the spectrum and reflecting critically on the turbulent situation of global politics, with both the immediate violence of Japanese oppression and the renewed threat of imminent world war. As a result, he composed his satirical, futurist long poem “War” (*Chŏnjaeng*), which I have translated elsewhere.² Sadly, due to the severe censorship of this modernist epic (51 out of 486 total lines were flagged impermissible), although finally approved for publication, the discouraged O abandoned the project altogether, and it was left in obscurity until veteran researcher Kim Chae-yong

1. Kumaki Tsutomu, “O Chang-hwan ūi ilbonŏ si [O Chang-hwan’s Japanese poems],” *Chigujŏk Saegye Munhak* (Global world literature) 9 (Fall 2017): 464–497.

2. O Chang-hwan, “War,” translated by Kevin Michael Smith, *Chigujŏk Saegye Munhak* (Global world literature) 13 (Spring 2019): 430–464.

uncovered the forgotten manuscript and published it verbatim in the first complete collection of O's poems in 2002.³

By 1936, however, O's poetic sensibilities had already shifted away from his youthful avant-garde energies to accommodate the profound sense of hopelessness that was pervading the colonized Korean populace through his characteristically bleak, world-weary vocabulary. The somber, native-Korean adjectives "dark" (*öduun*), "black" (*kömün*), "rotten" (*ssögün*), and "soggy" (*chilch'ökch'ökhan*), as well as the Sino-Korean compounds "despair" (*chölmang*), "dusk" (*hwanghon*), "hometown" (*kohyang*), and "homesickness" (*hyangsu*) reappear again and again in his collections *Castle Wall* and *Tribute* (*Hönsa*, 1939). The melancholy timbre of these two publications, from which the majority of my translations are taken, thereby attests to a fatalistic climate late in the seemingly interminable colonial occupation of Korea that scholar Janet Poole has deftly described as a moment "when the future disappears."⁴ Even the great revolutionary-cum-romanticist poet and critic Im Hwa, infamous for the uncharitable scorn he often dealt his intellectual adversaries, sung O's praises as late as 1939, labelling "Wasteland" (*Hwangmuji*) from *Tribute* a "masterpiece" (*yökjak*), and elucidating how O's poems are "an important expression of modern lyric poetry [that asserts] life's matter of fact sadness." Regretfully, "from this poet," Im Hwa concludes, we learn to recognize "the truth that we cannot find any value in enthusiasm for our modern lives."⁵

Interestingly, the figure of the seaport (*haehang*, *hanggu*) held particular weight for O, as numerous poems from *Castle Wall* return to the liminal space of the coastal port or the seagoing freighter in a futile attempt to extend the poetic speaker's

3. Kim Chae-yong, ed., *O Chang-hwan chönjip* (Collected works of O Chang-hwan) (Seoul: Silch'ön munhaksa, 2002).

4. Janet Poole, *When the Future Disappears: The Modernist Imagination in Late Colonial Korea* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

5. Im Hwa, "Sidan üi sin saedae [The new poetry generation]," in *Munhak üi nalli* (The logic of literature) (Seoul: Somyöng ch'ulp'an, 2009), 397.

sensorium outward, what scholar Cho Hyŏn-a has called a “will to escape” (*t'alch'ul ŭiji*), away from the stultifying misery of the local-colonial present.⁶ Yet these seaside vignettes are perhaps the darkest among all of O's decadent poems, replete with the many vices of modernity's underside: gambling, drugs and alcohol, prostitution, theft, murder. Furthermore, as “Seaport Map” (*Haehangdo*) reveals, what the speaker finds in his overseas journeys is only more of the same—the colonial ports of Aden and Singapore jump at the reader with their Roman letters appearing in the original. If for Im Hwa of the Hyŏnhaet'an poems, narrating passage across the Strait of Korea to and from Japan, the wide ocean represented a vital(ist) test of character before the headstrong, romanticized youths in whom he put his faith for national reformation, for the disillusioned O Chang-hwan, the seawater's dark abyss, to paraphrase Nietzsche, simply stares back at us, signifying nothing.

After liberation, O continued his writing and published several collections of activist socialist realism which I am unable to include here. He thereby joined a trend of likeminded, erstwhile modernists such as Yi T'ae-jun and Pak T'ae-wŏn to move leftward and northward (*wŏlbuk*) in the late 1940s. Suffering from kidney disease, O had the bittersweet distinction of being transported to Moscow for treatment, whereafter he published his final collection of panegyrics to the Soviet Union, *Red Flag* (*Pulgŭn ki*), in May of 1950. He died from the disease in North Korea the next year, leaving behind a literary legacy that takes on a rejuvenated urgency as our own future prospects sink below the horizon.

6. Cho Hyŏn-a, “O Chang-hwan si ŭi konggan kwa punyŏl ŭi munjae [The problem of space and division in the poetry of O Chang-hwan],” *Hanguk si yŏngu* 41 (2014): 309–338; see 310.