INTRODUCTION

The hegemonic sense of tradition is always the most active: a deliberately selective and connecting process which offers a historical and cultural ratification of a contemporary order. . . . It is significant that much of the most accessible and influential work of the counter-hegemony is historical: the recovery of discarded areas or the redress of selective and reductive interpretations. But this in turn has little effect unless the lines to the present, in the actual process of selective tradition, are clearly and actively traced. Otherwise any recovery can be simply residual or marginal. It is at the vital point of connection, where a version of the past is used to ratify the present and to indicate directions for the future, that a selective tradition is at once powerful and vulnerable.

—Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*

As the term is used in this book, “the proletarian wave” refers to a broad alliance of writers, intellectuals, publishers, editors, and readers that arose within Korean culture in the mid-1910s and declined in the early 1940s with the approach of the Great Pacific War. Commonly inspired by the rise of leftist movements on the international scene, these cultural agents came together in formal and informal associations, student groups, literary journals, writing contests, reading circles, and public lectures with the intention of filtering the cultural and social experience of colonial Korea through the ideological prism of various radical theories. The doctrines of anarchism and Marxism were powerful influences, but equally widespread were broader ideas about social democracy, the political emancipation of the masses, and the experience of the Russian Revolution. Ideological orthodoxy, in any case, was more the exception than the rule, as few classics of socialism had been yet translated into Korean. One could perhaps say that the zeitgeist had brought socialism to Korea at this time in history. The socialist message then resonated loudly among many who were trying to grasp the complex political, social, and cultural realities of a newly colonized nation.

This proletarian wave was never organized or institutionalized as a single movement. Throughout the colonial era (1910–45), the cultural left
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consisted of a sparse and often fractious constellation of groups that differed widely in membership and ideological orientation. The radical core of this small cultural universe was occupied, beginning in 1925, by the Marxist organization of the Korea Artist Proleta Federatio (KAPF), a high-profile collective whose advocacy of politicized arts would ultimately be stopped by the Japanese authorities in 1935. The KAPF was at once a propeller for the entire leftist movement and a catalyst for debate among its different constituencies, some of which espoused competing or barely compatible brands of socialist ideology. Ever since the mid-1910s, for example, anarchism in the style of Peter Kropotkin had been a major inspiration for Korean exiles and students in China and Japan, and throughout the colonial period the doctrine offered an important ideological alternative and counterpoint to Marxism. Likewise, in a shifting dynamic of competition and cooperation, an influential group of leftist nationalist intellectuals initially attacked the KAPF for its pronounced emphasis on class over nation, but these same intellectuals later allied with the Marxists in the umbrella organization of the Sin’ganhoe (New Korea Society; 1927–31). There were also groups that, owing to their social or geographical location, carried out their activities outside of the mainstream of colonial culture. In this respect, socialist women writers were virtually on their own due to the ingrained gender segregation of Korean society, and a substantial number of cultural activists among Korean emigrants in Japan tended to self-organize rather than refer to the KAPF or to other Korean organizations.

The influence of the proletarian wave was felt powerfully across Korea during the colonial period. As one commentator wrote, Marxism started spreading “like an influenza” after the rousing anti-Japanese insurrections of March 1, 1919, and by 1925 there was barely a young writer whose work did not exhibit some influence of radical ideologies.¹ Although exact membership is hard to assess, at its peak the KAPF alone reportedly counted over 150 active affiliates at ten branch offices, including one in Tokyo.² A survey of the archives yields over sixty left-leaning

1. Yŏm Sangsŏp compared the mid-1920s popularity of literary socialism to “an influenza” in “Kyegŭp munhak ŭl nonhaya,” 61. See also Paek Ch’ŏl’s account of the shaping influence of socialism on a generation of young writers in Ch’ungbo sin munhak sajosa, 277.
2. Kim Kijin, “Chosŏn e issŏsŏ ʹutollert’aria yesul undong,” 58. Kim wrote this document under duress in 1931 while he was in police detention at Sŏdaemun Prison, which may have induced him to offer a conservative estimate of member-
Korean-language periodicals published in Korea, Japan, China, and the Soviet Union during the first half of the twentieth century. The most prominent partisan magazines were *Kaebyŏk* (Creation; 1920–26), *Chosŏn chi kwang* (Light of Korea; 1922–30), and *Pip’an* (Criticism; 1931–40), but also friendly to the socialist cause were prestigious mainstream periodicals such as *Chosŏn ilbo* (Korean daily), *Hyŏndaep’yŏngnon* (Contemporary criticism), and *Sin yŏsŏng* (New women). Some writers and novels enjoyed broad popularity. Humorist Ch’ae Mansik, for example, whose biting satires chastised the habits of the rising urban bourgeoisie, was a mainstay in 1930s popular magazines. Similarly, Yi Kiyŏng, whose masterpiece *Hometown* (Kohyang) was greatly acclaimed during its original 1934 serialization in *Chosŏn ilbo*, had his novel reprinted six times in book form, all the while being heralded as the greatest Korean writer of peasant literature. The leftists’ contributions ran the gamut of literary genres, ranging from poems, novels, essays, and plays to cultural criticism as well as to translations of radical literature from Japan, Europe, Russia, and the United States.

The intense adventure of the proletarian wave did not end well. Initially emboldened by revolutionary and internationalist ideas, young Korean intellectuals soon found themselves under the strict watch of Japanese colonial authorities. All socialist activity was sent underground with the forcible dissolution of the KAPF in 1935, and by 1941, in the shadow of fascism and with the Great Pacific War under way, all forms of resistance became impracticable in the colonized peninsula.

If this activist wave struggled during the colonial era, however, its memory resonated long afterward. Indeed, the historical experience of the proletarian wave went on to become a high mark of political activism and a model of cultural politics for generations to come. The much celebrated democratization movement of the 1970s and 1980s took explicit inspiration from the leftist radicalism of the colonial period, and still

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3. See Kim Kunsu, *Han’guk chapchisa*, for a comprehensive list of colonial Korean periodicals. Though the majority of these journals were not exclusively focused on literature, many of them regularly published fiction and literary criticism.


5. For a detailed account of literary translations in colonial Korea, see Kim Pyŏngchŏl, *Han’guk kündae pŏnyŏk munhaksa* and *Han’guk kündae sŏyang munhak iipsa*. 
today the most prominent writers of that era are widely read and taught as part of the canonized tradition of Korean realism. On the strength of this posthumous vindication, the colonial leftist movement provides a fitting illustration of Stuart Hall’s dictum that cultural forces that are defeated at any one time do not simply disappear, as they become grist for the mill of new history in later eras. Today the proletarian wave occupies a special place in the collective memory of both South and North Koreans, and its legacy lives on as a common origin in the present and a possible unifying factor in the future.

This book studies the origins, development, and influence of leftist literature in Korea during the colonial era. The aim throughout is at once documentary, rebalancing, and rehabilitative. In the spirit of documentation, the book traces the historical, ideological, and aesthetic contours of a movement that has greatly influenced artistic tastes and cultural politics alike during and after the colonial period. In terms of rebalancing, the book uses class as a lens through which to view colonial Korean culture, after strong emphasis since the 1970s has been placed on the category of “the nation” as both a descriptive and a normative measure of the Korean experience of colonial modernity. Finally, in its rehabilitative approach, the book contributes to the aesthetic and ideological reevaluation of a once thriving literary movement. The decades of the Cold War, which in Korea continues to this day, have severely damaged the reputation and perceived viability of any form of leftist culture on the peninsula. Inspired by Raymond Williams’s counterhegemonic stance—his “recovery of discarded areas” in the face of hostile tradition—this book aims at repairing the consequences of much negative ideological accretion, and in the process it tries to bring back to life some of the authors, works, and ideas that have been central to Korean culture at a defining time in its modern history.

Although colonial leftist culture has been extensively discussed by scholars in Korea, there is currently a dearth of publications that treat of it in the English-speaking world. The most useful contributions are single chapters within four volumes—by Michael Robinson, Brian Myers, Sunyoung Park, “The Colonial Origin of Korean Realism.”

Gi-Wook Shin, and Tatiana Gabroussenko—whose main topics are either Korean nationalism (Robinson and Shin) or North Korean culture (Myers and Gabroussenko). Aside from this, colonial leftist writers are the objects of mention in reference works such as Peter Lee’s History of Korean Literature, whereas a less recent source are the two volumes of Robert Scalapino and Chung-sik Lee’s Communism in Korea, in which colonial leftist culture is briefly discussed, again, as a predecessor of North Korean culture.

The scarce interest in colonial leftist culture stems, at least in part, from its perceived failure to perform the critical function that is in general associated with a socialist cultural force. Indeed, emerging from the above scholarship is a rather unflattering critical picture of this literary tradition. According to Michael Robinson, “no coherent political line emerged among leftist writers,” some of whom exhibited “[little] evidence of appreciation for the nature of capitalism.” In Robinson’s view, the predominantly nationalist orientation of Korean leftist intellectuals, along with their predilection for the peasantry over the industrial working class, accounts for the minor and unorthodox manifestation of socialist culture in the colonial nation. Likewise, Brian Myers and Tatiana Gabroussenko have pointed to the pervasive unorthodoxy of leftist literature as a possible explanation for its supposed ineffectiveness. Although the Korean leftists thought of themselves as socialists, these critics assess, their works reveal a nationalist bent and, even more pronouncedly, a traditionalist and antimodern vision that is deeply incompatible with the core tenets of Marx-Leninism. Thus, in commenting on the KAPF’s early New Tendency literature, Myers writes that “[o]ne is hard put to find any significant reflection of Marxist ideology in [this literature]. . . . Most of what was written in these years was marked by the same

8. See Gabroussenko, Soldiers on the Cultural Front; Brian Myers, Han Sŏrya; Robinson, Cultural Nationalism; and Gi-Wook Shin, Ethnic Nationalism. Also important are the articles collected in a special issue of Positions (Fall 2006) on proletarian arts in East Asia, which together opened a new avenue of research by focusing on the hitherto ignored gender and diasporic subjectivities in colonial leftist literature. See Barraclough, “Tales of Seduction”; Kida, “Japanese-Korean Exchange”; and Perry, “Korean as Proletarian.”


10. See Robinson, Cultural Nationalism, 118–19 and 164.
ethnocentric pastoralism and anti-industrialism as contemporary Korean ‘bourgeois’ naturalism.”

In challenging this hostile critical scenario, the present book shows that, contrary to current assessment, a genuinely socialist influence was pervasive and fertile within the ideological landscape of the colonial period: leftist literature and culture played a prominent role in modern Korean debates, and they did so by propounding values that were fully integral to the international socialist culture of the early twentieth century. The key to appreciating this fact, this book suggests, is a recognition of the historically variable manifestations of socialist ideology in non-Western, and especially colonial, contexts. Both in its translation and in its local application, socialism in Korea played quite a different role from its counterparts in the West and the Soviet Union. The investigation of this variance, aided by a transnational and postcolonial perspective, enables us to better understand an intellectual tradition that has played an important role in Korean culture and society both during and after the colonial period.

Korea entered the modern era as a colony, and this condition had a profound impact on the ways in which socialist inspirations were imported and applied in the peninsula. Why did socialism become so

11. Brian Myers, Han Sŏrya, 17. These judgments, pointing to a perceived ideological dissonance at the heart of leftist literature, closely recall a view that was popular in South Korea during the 1950s and 1960s according to which socialism and communism never quite fit the complex ideological and cultural environment of Korea during the colonial period. Endorsing the image of socialist doctrines as extraneous to Korean culture, critics such as Cho Yŏnhyŏn declared that the “foreign-influenced” proletarian literature of the colonial period had been both “a mistake for the nation” and “an error for the literary arts.” See Cho Yŏnhyŏn, Hyŏndae munhak kaegwan, 184. Whereas earlier critics denounced the dangers of socialist ideology per se, however, more recent commentators have been keener to suggest that the leftists failed to endorse socialism. In Myers and Gabroussenko’s case, the argument has been integral to a broader strategy of cultural delegitimation of North Korea, whereby the hermit kingdom is shown to be a failed state, not just because of its international crimes and human rights violations, but also because of its inability to endorse socialist doctrine in a principled and competent manner. The origin of this flaw, these writers argue, lies in the intellectuals’ supposed endorsement of a “patrimonial” system of power that valued cronyism and personal affiliation over literary and intellectual achievement. See Brian Myers, Han Sŏrya, 1–2, and Gabroussenko, Soldiers on the Cultural Front, 167–74. For a previous deployment of the same strategy, applied in that case to Mao’s China, see James Myers, “The Political Dynamics of the Cult of Mao Tse-Tung.”
salient in Korea at this moment in history? What impact did the colonial condition have on the leftist literary practice? And how, specifically, did leftist writers apply socialist doctrines in the complex ideological and cultural environment of a newly colonized nation? As Parts I and II of this book show, although varieties of activism ranged widely across the leftist movement, at least two features generally characterized socialist cultural practice in modern Korea. First, leftist intellectuals often gave a nationalist spin to newly imported socialist ideas. They thus rendered the Marxist category of the proletariat through the nationalism-inspired concept of minjung (the people), and they projected the vision of Korea as an independent “proletarian nation” that ought to define its own role in both foreign and domestic politics. Second, Korean leftists often responded to the socioeconomic conditions of colonial Korea by focusing on the rural question rather than on the more typically communist struggle of the industrial proletariat. They thereby continued a local tradition that, going back to the Tonghak peasant uprisings of the 1880s, had identified the peasants as both the bearers of oppression and the agents of social change in the mostly rural Korean peninsula.

Beginning in the 1950s, under the changed Cold War conditions of South Korea, the socialist cultural tradition of the colonial period was either forgotten or, more frequently, it was remembered as a dangerously mistaken political option. The detractors of the movement were not alone in projecting on it an image of danger, as even friendly commentators—particularly among the South Korean activists of the 1970s and 1980s—often glossed on this literature’s socialist content in favor of a politically more acceptable nationalist emphasis. Leftist culture has thus become an uncomfortable ideological heritage in South Korean as well as Western debates since the end of the colonial period. The vitality of this tradition within the cultural dynamics of the colonial era has yet to have been fully acknowledged, with the result that socialist values and politics remain as impracticable in Korea today as they were during the ideologically charged decades of the Cold War.

In a 1994 essay titled “Traveling Theory Reconsidered,” Edward Said offered insights into the ways in which an established critical paradigm, or “theory,” can find innovative and productive applications when deployed in contexts other than its original one. When theory “travels” across cultures, Said remarked, its movement necessarily opens it up to “the
possibility of actively different locales, sites, and situations.” New settings, reflecting contingencies of time, culture, and geography, typically alter a theory in substantial ways, and they may result in novel cultural formations that cannot properly be seen as the mere copies of an original. “To speak here only of borrowing and adaptation is not adequate,” wrote Said, because what is established between the original theorist and his or her followers is rather “an intellectual, and perhaps moral, community of a remarkable kind, affiliation in the deepest and most interesting sense of the word.”

Said’s pluralism of affiliation, with its emphasis on the openness of theory, should be kept in mind when looking at the global migration of socialist thought during the twentieth century. Leftist cultures within colonial and Third World settings differed considerably from their more famous counterparts in the Soviet Union and Western Europe. The differences involved, however, do not immediately indicate a “failure” of socialist culture in those contexts. A Eurocentric attitude emphasizing orthodoxy and stylistic resemblance has too often regarded Western and Soviet Marxism as the paradigms for socialist cultures around the world, and it has thereby relegated socialist experiences in the periphery to the status of replicas of an original model, if not outright deviations from one.

The above considerations bear directly upon this book’s reevaluation of leftist literature in colonial Korea. For example, in his 1988 study of cultural nationalism in colonial Korea, Michael Robinson offers a convincing representation of leftist intellectuals as major actors in the movement of national resistance. In virtue of that representation, however, he also doubts the genuine character of the leftists’ socialist commitment: “The majority of leftists had little connection with the Korean Communist movement in exile. They were, in fact, not orthodox Communists at all. They did not submit to party discipline, and, as the Comintern had already pointed out, ‘nationalism,’ that is, the liberation and independence of Korea, was their primary motivation.” In assuming that there would be a tension between nationalist and socialist commitments, Robinson implicitly vouches for a Marxist view of the nation as a quintessentially

13. See Robinson, Cultural Nationalism, 114. Robinson has since omitted this view from his recent history textbook, Korea’s Twentieth Century Odyssey. He may thus hold a different position today, although the more recent text does not explicitly disavow his previous view.
bourgeois institution. In modern colonial settings, however, nationhood has often been a prime aspiration of progressive and revolutionary forces, and an anticolonial nationalist stance has been integral to many brands of socialism defended by indigenous resistance movements. In the case of Korea, Japanese settlers were in control of most of the industrial capital in the colony, which made it imperative for Korean socialists to give their practice a strong anti-imperialist and nationalist edge. Their move was in keeping with international debates of the early 1920s, as Lenin and the Comintern had urged the communists in colonized societies to take active part in national liberation movements. It was a trend that would later become established worldwide, as nationalist intellectuals such as Frantz Fanon and Ho Chi Minh relied heavily on Marxism in formulating their anticolonial stances in the 1950s and 1960s.

A study of leftist culture in a colonial society naturally stands at an intersection between Marxist theory and postcolonial studies. “The originality of the colonial context,” Fanon famously observed in colonial Algeria, “is that economic reality, inequality, and the immense difference of ways of life never came to mask the human realities.” According to him, because the colonial socioeconomic order rests primarily upon a racial hierarchy, “the economic substructure is also a superstructure” in colonies. A Marxist analysis should accordingly “always be slightly stretched” when we think of colonial society and analyze its cultural products.

This Fanonian insight forces a reconsideration of the distance between the socialist realism of the Soviet Union and leftist literature and culture in Korea and in other colonized nations. That distance is measured by way of “colonial differences” that need to be studied with a culturally and historically attuned analytical approach.

14. Marx himself characterized nationalism as one of the ideological tools of the bourgeoisie. See Marx, German Ideology, 79–81.
16. The assumption of a bourgeois monopoly over nationalist discourse is predicated on the prevalent experience of early capitalist development in the West, in which nations and the middle class had often fully developed by the time socialism appeared. By contrast, in the decolonizing world, the idea of the nation was often reclaimed by the working class and the oppressed masses, with the result that the hegemony over national culture was in many cases contested between the middle class—Fanon’s reviled national bourgeoisie—and the lower social strata for whom socialists spoke.
17. All quotations are from Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth, 40.
Two dimensions of colonial difference command special significance in the case of Korea. On the one hand, there is the distance between the West (and the Soviet Union) and Korean leftist culture. On the other hand, a further marker of difference lies between the imperial cultural hegemony of Japan and colonial Korean subjectivity. The appropriation of Gramsci’s Marxian concept of cultural hegemony in exploring the shifting and intertwined relationship between the colonizer and the colonized is perhaps one of the most powerful and influential theoretical innovations that postcolonial studies has brought to the study of colonialism and imperialism.\textsuperscript{18} Similarly, Homi Bhabha’s theorization of a “third space” between colonizer and colonized offers a way to overcome simultaneously the nationalist insistence on native self-construction and the (neo)imperialist suggestion that the colonized can speak only through the language of the colonizer.\textsuperscript{19} Instead of essentializing the Koreans’ stance against hegemonic culture, this book situates the analysis of that stance within its discursively constructed nature and historicity. In Korea as elsewhere, a counterhegemonic cultural practice was never static but constantly changed in response to the evolving historical forces in the Japanese empire—and the world beyond it—and their consequent reverberations within hegemonic imperial culture itself.

Accounting for the Marxist edge of my analysis, a focus on leftist culture also demands that the postcolonial emphasis on colonialism as a psychological and cultural project of domination be complemented with a healthy dose of critical attention to its economic and material dimensions. This balancing act means more than just embedding our reading of a text in both its material and cultural contexts. A Marxist analysis of colonialism brings to the fore the issue of class alongside and in conjunction with that of race. This critical move challenges, among other things, the postcolonial tendency to reify the West and the East, or the empire and the colony, into political entities without internal fragmentations and divergences.\textsuperscript{20} The intellectual and personal affiliations between Japanese and Korean leftist writers, for instance, complicate our understanding of the modes of interrelatedness between the colonizer and the colonized be-

\textsuperscript{18} For Gramsci’s Marxist discussion of hegemony as a ruling ideology, see his \textit{Selections from Prison Notebooks}, 275–76.
\textsuperscript{19} Bhabha, \textit{The Location of Culture}, 36–39.
\textsuperscript{20} For the critique of the postcolonial reification of the West, see Cooper, “Postcolonial Studies and the Study of History” and Lazarus, “The Fetish of ‘the West’ in Postcolonial Theory.”
beyond the mainstream postcolonial paradigm. In this sense, a Marxist consider-
ation of class goes hand in hand with a more nuanced understand-
ing of nationalism as a flexible discourse that in colonial Korea engaged
elements of imperial culture at least as much as it antagonized them.

It is not unusual for studies of a leftist culture to engage in the re-
buttal of several supposed negative misconceptions about their subject
matter. The present study is no exception. In addition to having been seen
as “not leftist enough,” colonial Korean leftist literature has been from
time to time criticized for being too dogmatic and too undogmatic, too
naive and too intellectual, too derivative and too idiosyncratic, and too
conservative and too experimental. Though none of these arguments is
specifically engaged in this study, one should not lose sight of a deeper,
underlying reality: from inside an expanding capitalist cultural hege-
mony, the objection to socialist arts and literature is often systemic and
ideological. Worldviews partake of the hegemonic, they are internalized,
and they define limits of intelligibility just as they evolve in exchange with
a myriad cultural formations. This book, then, strives to put literary his-
tory in the service of counterhegemony. If argument cannot hope by it-
self to dissipate the shadows of the ideological, perhaps the plain act of
representing a neglected literary tradition can serve the cause of its re-
habilitation to history. This is especially so for leftist literature, which dur-
ing the Cold War suffered an intensely politicized rejection. Today we may
rescue this literature by simply reading it, immediately and without pre-
conceptions, thereby bypassing the ideological accretions of later decades
as well as the ennui and complacency of the present.

Efforts to record the history of colonial leftist literature began as early as
1935 with Im Hwa’s publication of “Introduction to Modern Korean Lit-
erature” (Chosŏn sinmunhaksaron sŏsŏl), which was written in part as
a defense of the KAPF after the group was forcibly dissolved by the Japa-
nese authorities.21 After the division of the two Koreas, however, the topic

21. Im Hwa, “Chosŏn sinmunhaksaron sŏsŏl.” Im’s late-colonial writings on
modern Korean literary history are widely considered as foundational works for
Korean literary historiography. Aside from Im’s work, Paek Ch’ŏl’s Chosŏn sin
munhak sajosa (History of modern Korean literary trends, 1948), the first attempt
at a comprehensive exposition of colonial literary history, initially devoted over
two hundred pages to the socialist movement and its cultural products. By the
time of the publication of the book’s revised edition under the shortened title
of socialist culture became taboo in both academic and public discourse, and a strict ban was imposed on the circulation and republication of the works of colonial leftist writers. The ban was lifted only after the democratization of South Korea in 1987, at which point early socialist culture came to attract intense academic interest and was rediscovered by researchers and activists within the broad minjung cultural movement.\textsuperscript{22} Aiming to uphold the values and interests of the common Korean people, or the minjung, these intellectuals stood for a nationalist rapprochement with the North and reclaimed a shared inter-Korean cultural heritage against the constraints of the Cold War order. Their collective efforts culminated in 1993 with the publication of Han’guk kündae minjok munhaksa (History of modern Korean literature), a revisionary literary history of the colonial era that placed leftist literature at its center while embedding it in a nationalist interpretive framework.\textsuperscript{23}

Rediscovery in the context of democratization introduced many colonial socialist writers to an unofficial but influential South Korean literary canon. Following upon that, between the late 1990s and the present day, new studies have attempted to integrate the critical reception of socialist literature within broader reflections on modernity and postnationalist colonial history. Some researchers have refined and expanded the established canon to include the hitherto marginalized figures of leftist women writers, anarchist thinkers, and the diasporic writers of Japan’s

\textsuperscript{22} One important exception to the predemocratization silence was the literary criticism of Kim Yoon-sik. Already during the 1970s, this literary historian published pioneering studies on colonial leftist critical essays. See Kim Yoon-sik, Han’guk kündae munye pip’yŏngsa.

\textsuperscript{23} Kim Jae-Yong et al., Han’guk kündae minjok munhaksa. The 1980s minjung cultural discourse had its early roots in the minjok (national) literary discourse of the 1970s. The notion of progressive, people-oriented national literature had already been formulated as an antithesis of conservative official national literature by Paik Nak-chung in his seminal 1974 essay “Minjok munhak kaenyŏm ŭi chŏngnip ŭl wihae.” The essay was translated into English in 1993 with the title “The Idea of a Korean National Literature Then and Now.” For a discussion of the continuities between the 1970s ideal of progressive national literature and the more clearly class-based minjung literature, see the essays collected in Song Minyŏp, ed., Minjung munhangnon.
Korean immigrant communities. Others have contributed to tempering the occasional nationalist zeal of minjung criticism, as they have highlighted the many cross-cultural affiliations between Korean and Japanese leftists as well as the more uncertain, ideologically ambiguous character of late-colonial socialist writings in Korea. Still another trend has been to ground the study of early socialist literature more firmly within the frameworks of modern cultural studies and social history. In an example of this approach, a group of scholars centered at Seoul’s Sungkyunkwan University have produced a body of scholarship that attends to the impacts of socialist culture on the everyday life of colonial Koreans, focusing in particular on the role of ideology in the creation of social spaces such as reading groups, night schools, mutual aid societies, and the like.

In alignment and conversation with these new lines of Korean criticism, this book too seeks to approach its subject matter in terms that are cultural rather than ideological, sizing up the territory of colonial leftist literature according more to influence and affinity than to doctrinal orthodoxy. The very coinage of the term “proletarian wave” is meant both to invite flexibility and to acknowledge the many different modes and forms that socialist culture assumed in the time-space of colonial Korea. Whereas socialist literature was previously identified with the production of KAPF writers, that Marxist organization is here embedded in an ideologically composite network of influences that also included anarchist, nationalist, feminist, and liberal inspirations. Similarly, welcoming the lessons of comparative and transnational studies, an effort has been made here to highlight the many personal and intellectual ties between Korean intellectuals and their counterparts in Japan, China, and Europe.

24. For recent studies on leftist women writers, see Kim Inhwan et al., Kang Kyŏngaesidae wa munhak; Ku Moryong, ed., Paek Sinæ; and Lee Sang-Kyung, Im Sunduk. For anarchist literature, see Kim “T’aekho, Han’guk kundae anak’ijum munhak and Yi Horyong, Han’guk üi anak’ijum. And for Korean leftist writers in Japan, see Kim Jae-Yong and Kwak Hyŏnggun, Kim Saryang and Kim Haktong, Chang Hyŏkch’u.

25. See, for instance, Cho Chin’gi, Hanil p’uro munhangnon; Munhak kwa sa-sang yŏng’guhoe, Im Hwa munhak üi chaeinsik; and No Sangnae, Han’guk munin üi chŏnhyang.

26. See the collected essays in Sanghŏ hakhoe, Kundaechisik ŭrosōui sahoejuŭi and Sungkyunkwan taehakyotongsia haksurwŏn, Kundaechisik ŭrosŏi sahoejuŭi wa kŭ munhwa, special issue, Taedong munhwa yŏng’gu 64 (2008). Also see Son Yugyŏng, P’uro munhak üi kamsŏng kujo, and Ch’oe Pyŏnggu, “1920 nyŏndae p’uro munhak üi hyŏngsŏng kwajŏng.”
Russia, and other countries. Aside from its intrinsic historical interest, research on these international lines of cultural transmission serves to rebalance the nationalist narratives that are still prominent today in East Asian cultural discourses.

Doctrinal correctness and ideological compliance are questionable evaluative standards for colonial leftist literature, which should rather be judged based on its cultural impact, its effectiveness in raising consciousness, and the counterhegemonic function that it performed within its own specific colonial context. For this reason, Part I of the book, “Backgrounds,” examines the social, political, and economic context within which leftist literature arose and developed in colonial Korea, focusing on the incipient industrial development, the formation of the first labor organizations, and the early efforts to establish a communist party in the peninsula. Central to this examination are two institutional factors—the strength of the labor movement and the instability of the Korean Communist Party—that in different ways distinguished the experiences of colonial leftist writers from those of their counterparts in Japan, China, the West, and the established communist regime of the Soviet Union. Taken together, these factors contribute to an explanation of the unorthodox character of the left in Korea, and they also set the stage for our later appreciation of its literature’s countercultural function under the specific conditions of colonial Korean society.

Part II, “Landscapes,” provides broad overviews of the history, institutions, ideology, and aesthetics of the colonial Korean leftist literary movement. The label of a “proletarian wave,” which is the book’s original coinage, aims to gather the multiple and often discordant aspects of colonial leftist culture within a recognizable framework, stressing at once the ideological cohesiveness of the movement and the importance of its rise at this moment in history. Chapter 2 thus traces the historical and institutional contours of the proletarian wave from its origins in the early anarchist groups of the 1910s through its decline on the eve of the Pacific War in the early 1940s. Drawing primarily from contemporary periodicals, writers’ memoirs, and the original and reprinted editions of their works, this outline presents the leftist movement as a composite cultural formation, a wide river whose shifting streams were formed by the inflows of ideology, ethnicity, gender, and class. In spite of the KAPF’s attempts to helm the movement, the chapter shows, outlying groups and intellectuals maintained their distinctive voices throughout, often
engaging in spirited debates concerning the direction and aims of leftist culture in Korea.

Shifting to a thematic focus, Chapter 3 discusses the profound aesthetic and ideological impacts of the proletarian wave on the cultural scene of colonial Korea. A widely held narrative of Korean literary modernity credits almost exclusively liberal reformist intellectuals for having introduced to Korea the modernizing ideas of artistic autonomy, individualism, enlightenment, and more. However, literary modernity in Korea was just as much the achievement of leftist writers and intellectuals. The leftists shared with the reformists the ideals of national liberation as well as social engagement, but for the rest they rejected individualism in favor of communitarian values; they criticized the elitist tendencies of both traditional and bourgeois culture; and they propagated an uncompromisingly materialist approach to the explanation of realities such as unequal development, colonialism, and war. Leftist culture was thus the proponent of an “alternative modernity” within Korea’s colonial situation, and it took a stance that was both progressive and countercultural in its interaction with other cultural forces of the period. This representation rebalances the critical image of leftist culture as merely a more radical branch of the national resistance movement, and it contradicts any characterization of the leftists as antimodern advocates of nativist values and traditionalist utopia.

Taken together, Chapters 2 and 3 build a broad case for the reevaluation of colonial leftist literature. This literature is shown there to have been more pervasive than previously assumed and to have made a fertile and integral contribution to the transformation of Korea into a modern culture and society. Moving then from general landscape to detail, Part III, “Portraits,” offers an intertwining set of case studies that are meant to display the variety and complexity of the leftist literary experience in colonial Korea. Touching upon the KAPF literary group as well as three major leftist writers—Yom Sangsŏp, Kang Kyŏngae, and Kim Namch’ŏn—these stand-alone monographic explorations advance the book’s case for the pervasiveness and fertility of the socialist influence on colonial Korea. In so doing, the chapters adopt a fresh perspective over some of the defining questions of Marxist literary criticism—such as the quest for a realist aesthetics, the clash between proletarian writers and leftist nationalists, the relation between socialism and feminism, and the rise of pan-Asianism as an imperialist war ideology. Overall, while
keeping their focus on the intellectual experiences of individual writers, these chapters also try to embed their subject matter in a broader social and historical context, opening up to more general discussions of, among others, the 1920s era of radical activism, the economic prosperity of the 1930s, and the concurrent militarization of Korean society throughout that decade.

Since this book largely deals with literary, cultural, and historical issues, little space has been devoted to the conceptual problems of political theory. Before commencing the primary discussion, however, it may be helpful to clarify some of the ideological labels that are central to the analysis. As it is understood throughout, “socialist” characterizes any political theory that joins a critique of modern capitalist society to an egalitarian and communitarian vision. In this definition, socialist views are distinguished from liberal ones by their oppositional stance on capitalism, and they differ from fascist views in projecting a vision that is communitarian rather than statist. At a slight but significant remove from “socialist,” the adjective “leftist” is understood here as synonymous with “socialism-inspired.” A writer is leftist, in this sense, when his or her writings exhibit some substantial influence of socialism, regardless of whether socialism is also the doctrine to which those writings are ultimately committed. A writer such as Yŏm Sangsŏp, therefore, whose primary ideological affiliation was nationalist, qualifies as leftist in virtue of the formative influence that socialism had on his writings. Finally, turning from the general to the specific, “anarchist” and “Marxist” characterize two different versions of a socialist position, which are identified by their respective descendence from the ideas of Bakunin-Kropotkin on the one hand and Marx-Engels on the other. These two traditions exerted by far the most prominent influence on Korean leftist culture, although the ideas of other socialist thinkers did on occasion appear in the thoughts of individual writers.

Rereading the past is often a way of reflecting on the present and, perhaps, the future. More than two decades have passed since “the end of history,” the triumphant 1992 claim of international capitalism that the status quo is the best of all possible worlds. Indeed, early in the new millennium the funeral toll for Marxism and socialism was still ringing loud. Today, however, the atmosphere is far more congenial for a class-based critique of global society, with the United States, Europe,

27. See Fukuyama, The End of History.
and other developed countries undergoing arguably the worst economic and financial crises since the Great Depression of the 1930s. Many of the problems that we are grappling with today are similar to those that were faced by colonial leftist writers, such as widespread unemployment, a widening gap between rich and poor, the pauperization of women, and the racial discrimination against transnational labor migrants. Colonial Koreans lived in an era when many people still believed in the possibility of fundamental social reform. If we recognize our life experiences and aspirations in theirs, we may just be able to feel that way again, and may be inspired by values such as equality and social justice even as we plunge farther into a new century of modern capitalist history.