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A Friendship of Heart and Mind: Kim dong-ri and Seo jeong-ju

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Abstract

Kim Dong-ri and Seo Jeong-ju were prodigious personalities of Korean literature in the 20th century. The friendship of these prominent writers began in the 1930s and lasted their entire lives. Together they contributed to the reconstruction of the literary world in Korea after the end of the Japanese Occupation. This paper examines their biographies, auto-biographies, and different testimonies in an attempt to understand and appreciate not only the development and depth of their friendship, but also their legacy to Korean literature that was based on the literary and humanistic values they shared.

Keywords: Kim Dong-ri; Seo Jeong-ju; literature; Korean novel; Korean poetry; 20th century

An unbreakable bond of friendship tied together two of the foremost authors of contemporary Korean literature in the 20th century, novelist Kim Dong-ri 김동리 (1913–1995) and poet Seo Jeong-ju 서정주 (1915–2000).

Author of *Eul-hwa, A Woman Shaman* [을화, *Eulhwa*] and *Life-Size Buddha* [등신불, *Deungsinbul*], Kim Dong-ri left a considerable corpus of novels¹ which, to him, were a ‘cornerstone in the history of contemporary Korean literature’ (1995: ‘Preface’, t. I, 13). Throughout his career, which began in the 1930s under Japanese occupation (1910–1945), he tirelessly reflected on Korean identity and tradition, so much so that he eventually reached the status of ‘the most Korean writer’ (Yi Dong-ha 1996: 71). Yet by dealing with fundamental issues, his universe exceeds the national sphere. Korean society, its past and its evolution, as depicted in his works, form a background against

¹Kim’s most representative works include: *무녀도* [*Portrait of a Woman Shaman*, 1936], *황토기* [*Loess Valley*, 1939], *달* [*The Moon*, 1947], *역마* [*The Stagecoach*, 1948], *당고개무당* [*The Shaman at the Dang Pass*, 1958], *등신불* [*Life-Size Buddha*, 1961], *사반의 십자가* [*Shaphan’s Cross*, 1955–1957], *까치소리* [*The Magpie’s Cry*, 1966], *을화* [*Eul-hwa, A Woman Shaman*, 1978] and *만자동경* [*Queen Seondeok’s Mirror*, 1979].

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which the whole of humanity is portrayed: life, death, love, human destiny, nature... Through this, he turns literature into 'a form of the ultimate goal of existence' (Kim Dong-ri 1995: 'Preface', t. I, 13), which transcends the actual boundaries of space and time.

Seo Jeong-ju, with whom Kim Dong-ri maintained a close friendship, is a major figure in Korean poetry. The author of 15 volumes, collecting over 1,000 poems², he is mostly considered the greatest poet of the Korean language. His work touches on many facets of Korean sensibility and traditional culture, while he perfectly masters the dialect of his native province, Jeolla. His verses merge together a deeply personal sentiment and a historical sense. They express the feelings of human distress caused by the ongoing troubles in the country. As the title of his last collection may suggest, *Poems of an 80-Year-Old Wandering Boy* [80소년 떠돌이의 시, 80 sonyeon tteodori-ui si, 1997], Seo Jeong-ju led an erratic life and struggled to build a personal identity amidst the turmoil of Korean society in which he found himself.

The lives and paths of Kim Dong-ri and Seo Jeong-ju share similar features grounded in their time. From 1910 to 1990, Korea suffered from a perpetual political whirlwind: from the Japanese occupation (1910-1945), it moved straight into the occupation by the American and Soviet armies (1945-1948), followed by a civil war (1950-1953), a student revolution (April 19, 1960) and a military dictatorship (1961-1987). The literary world of these two authors took shape during this complex period and had no way of escaping these social and political upheavals. They had to face the demands of their times, whether through action or reaction.

The literary friendship between Kim Dong-ri and Seo Jeong-ju budded from their first encounter in 1933, as young intellectuals aged 21 and 19, and lasted their entire lives. One was a novelist, an organizer, and a fighter; the other, a nomadic poet yet a fellow traveler alongside his friend. Despite their different characters, their joint literary activities seemed to have only strengthened their friendship. Their bond was not exclusively grounded in their mutual sympathy and affection; it was also nourished by their commitment to defending Korean literature in a historically and politically uncertain period. Their friendship represents a core element in the history of contemporary Korean literature. Kim Dong-ri and Seo Jeong-ju played critical roles in the thematic and ideological development of Korean literature by meditating, reassessing, and thereby enriching in their writings the role of Korean tradition and philosophies embodied in Buddhism and other forms of thought.

We will rely on their biographies and autobiographies, on their mutual testimonies and those of the witnesses who knew them, to try to reconstruct the context in which they met, to hopefully gain an insight into the peculiarities of their friendship (including a short breakup) and its relevance for Korean literature.

²Seo Jeong-ju published numerous collections of poems: 화사집 [Flower Snake, 1941], 귀족도 [Return to Shu, 1948], 서정주시선 [Seo Jeong-ju's Poems, 1956], 신라초 [Silla, 1961], 동천 [Winter, 1968], 질마재 신화 [Myths of Jilmajae, 1975], 떠돌이의 시 [Poems of a Wanderer, 1976], 서(西)으로 가는 달처럼 [Like a Moon Going West, 1980], 학이 울고 간 날들의 시 [Poems of the Days When the Crane Cried, 1982], 안 잊히는 일들 [Unforgettable Things, 1983], 노래 [Songs, 1984], 팔할이 바람 [Eighty Percent of Wind, 1988], 산시 [Mountain Poems, 1991], 늙은 떠돌이의 시 [Poems of an Old Wanderer, 1993], 80소년 떠돌이의 시 [Poems of an 80-Year-Old Wanderer, 1997].

Shared backgrounds: Disrupted education, self-training, love for poetry

Kim Dong-ri and Seo Jeong-ju were born under the Japanese occupation. This particular context deeply affected their paths in life. The circumstances of their country, a reality they both lived, prompted similar feelings of emptiness and disappointment; neither received regular schooling; and both were self-taught.

Kim Dong-ri was born in Gyeongju in North Gyeongsang Province, in the south-eastern part of the Korean peninsula. He attended several different schools: first it was the traditional *Seodang* school, where he learned Chinese characters; then, since his mother paid devotion to the Gyeongju temple, he attended its private Gyeonam school. In 1928, he entered Gyeseong boarding school in Daegu. Here the freedom he had known at Gyeongju was replaced by a cloistered life that he found gloomy, depressing, and stifling. In 1930, he began his studies at Gyeongsin College in Seoul, established in 1885 by American missionary Horace Underwood (1859–1916). Here he became absorbed by the study of the Bible, by prayers and devotional service. He received high-quality education in a harmonious environment and acquired a taste for literature under the influence of his professors. Yet, after only a year, his second brother Yeong-bong asked him to temporarily suspend his studies due to a misfortune in the family business. Kim Dong-ri complied: in fact, he never resumed his studies (Kim Jeong-suk 1996: 131).

After this setback, Kim Dong-ri set about educating himself fervently. He devoured the vast collection of books belonging to his elder brother, Beombu, a learned sinologist, who put him up for about three months. In this house, he became acquainted with prominent Western philosophers such as Aristotle, Plato, Spinoza, Kant, Hegel, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche. Beom-bu did all he could to share his knowledge with his younger brother. In his library, Kim Dong-ri was able to lead an intense intellectual life. A friend employed at Gyeongju train station provided additional help: Kim Dong-ri was granted free access to the railway company's library and, thanks to the same friend, to the collections of the Seoul library. Thus, he was able to read the world masterpieces in Japanese translation: 150 volumes of literature and a collection of philosophy books. Through these he acquired a solid body of knowledge, which eventually became the background of his own novels. Believing he had put in his best effort at self-formation, he was plagued by a previously unknown distress prompted by the lack of recognition of his talent and abilities. This affliction was not alleviated until 1933, when he met the future poet Seo Jeong-ju (Kim Dong-ri 2013a: vol. XXVI, 108–109).

Seo Jeong-ju was born in 1915 in Jilmajae village, North Jeolla Province, in the south-western part of Korea. His life was rather more eventful than Kim Dong-ri's. Like Kim Dong-ri, he discovered Chinese classics at the *Seodang* traditional school in his native village. In 1924, he entered Julpo elementary school on the outskirts of his village, where his father was an attendant to the wealthy family of Kim Sung-su (1891–1955) (Seo Jeong-ju 2015b: vol. IV, 121–135). In his poem 'Self-portrait' [자화상, 'Jahwasang', ca. 1938], Seo confessed that his father 'was a servant and would not come home, even late at night' (Seo Jeong-ju 2015a: t. I, 27). In 1929, a student at Jungang boarding school in Seoul, he took part in the Student Independence Movement. Initially sparked by a dispute between Korean and Japanese students in Gwangju, the uprising led to anti-Japanese protests nation-wide. Seo Jeong-ju himself was arrested by the Japanese police (Seo Jeong-ju 2015b: t. IV, 136–140). Upon his release, being influenced by Russian

socialism, he left the comfort of his boarding house and moved to a poor neighborhood (ibid.: 141-145). In 1930, he was expelled from the school on suspicion of inspiring the commemoration of the first anniversary of the Gwangju student uprising. Back in his hometown, he enrolled at Gochang High School in 1931, but was forced to abandon his studies as a result of his involvement in the White Paper Alliance, which rejected teachings and examinations that complied with colonial policy (ibid.: 146-150). Being an active rebel, Seo in no way fit into the mold of his own society, which adhered to the norms and values imposed by the colonizers and demanded obedience to one's teachers.

These events sent Seo into deep despair, which was even further worsened by his great indigence. The poem 'Self-portrait' voices the pain he felt due to a combination of existential instability and social injustice: 'Eighty percent of what made me grow during my twenty-three years came from the wind...' (Seo Jeong-ju 2015a: t. I, 27). The wind symbolizes instability and the difficulties he went through in his youth. He grew increasingly interested in Greek mythology and Nietzsche: the *Übermensch* and the idea of the eternal return expounded in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* became instrumental for him to overcome depression. To enact Nietzsche's *Übermensch*, he moved to Seoul in 1933, with the plan to later leave for Manchuria or Russia. He finally settled in the capital, and there developed a profound passion for literature. He took up the suggestion of a Japanese tolstoyan and Christian who assisted the indigents in Seoul to join the actions to collect recyclable waste, and once again settled in a working-class neighborhood (Seo Jeong-ju 2015b: t. IV, 165-169).

It was then that he met his master, the monk Park Han-yeong (1870-1948), also known as Yeonghodang. The study of the Surangama Sutra, or Hwaemgyeong, at the Daewonam hermitage in Gaeunsa temple eventually cured Seo of his taste for a vagrant life. Buddhism turned him towards a more stable and serene psychology (ibid.: 170-173).

In 1933, he also met Kim Dong-ri, who was then accommodated in Seoul by his elder brother Beombu, a professor at the Zen Buddhism Institute in Anguk-dong. Their encounter was due to Misa, one of Beombu's disciples. Kim Dong-ri writes in his *Autobiography* [자전기, *Jajeongi*, 1970] that they instantly found themselves on the same wavelength; this is how Seo recalls their first meeting:

In the winter of 1933, when we were young apprentice writers – I was 19 and he 21 – we first met in the home of Master Beombu, his elder brother, in Philundong, Seoul. I believe he liked chatting with me. He did not stop talking of literature and life. Eventually, he followed me to the Daewonam hermitage where I lodged, in the faraway Anam-dong district. He continued talking throughout the night. I remember that it was only after I fell asleep, exhausted, that I no longer heard him. (cit. in Kim Dong-ri 2013b: t. XXXIII, 12)³

As the beginning of a long-lasting, intense human bond, this first encounter very much resembles friendship at first sight. Kim Dong-ri was so fascinated by Seo Jeong-ju that he followed him to his residence to continue their conversation. What most

³All translations in this article are my own.

appealed to him was probably the young man's wandering soul, so close to his own spirit marked by the restless path of a self-taught person. He finally met someone he could talk to open-heartedly, who would understand him and with whom he could share the same passion for literature. The two young men tried to assess their literary skills:

That day, Jeon-ju came to see me again. He showed me a poem titled 'Praise of Parents', and I presented him, I believe, with a poetic play in five acts. [...] We sought each other's opinions and encouraged each other. Then we continued our discussions on world literature, and engaged in a competition to name the all-time great writers of the world. We offered a few criticisms and expressed our common admiration. We really got on well together. What is more, we had a lot of mutual respect for our extensive knowledge of world literature. (Kim Dong-ri 1970: 381)

The euphoria lasted from winter 1933 to the summer of 1935, when Seo Jeong-ju left Seoul for his native countryside. Kim felt a distress akin to abandonment, for 'Jeong-ju was the only friend I could meaningfully relate to' (ibid.: 382-383), he stated in his *Autobiography*. A month after bidding farewell to his friend at Seoul station, Kim also made his way back to his province.

They reunited in the Fall of 1936, from which point their friendship only continued to strengthen. Kim moved into a boarding house in the Yeongeon-dong district of Seoul; his first novel, *The Descendant of the Hwarangs* [화랑의 후예, *Hwarang-ui huye*], had just obtained the Young Writers Prize of the Joseon Jungang Daily, while Seo was a student at the Jungang Buddhist School (중앙불교전문학교, Jungang Bulgyo Jeonmun Hakgyo): 'At that time, Dong-ri and I were living in a boarding house, where he had rented a room and hosted me for free. Almost every day, we would go to 7, Gahoe-dong district, and return home after sitting silently, like two mutes, for two or three hours' (Seo Jeong-ju 2017: t. VIII, 51). Attracted by anarchism, they spent their time together in their room in the boarding house, on the streets, or in cafés.

From the outset, their nearly brotherly bond proved to be particularly strong, deeper than most kinships. Kim Dong-ri was entering a stage in his life where the moral support of Beombu, his elder brother by more than 16 years, was no longer enough. In addition, Beombu was constantly pursued by the Japanese police and was not able to lead a stable existence. The encounter with Seo Jeong-ju relieved the distance he felt from his elder, learned brother, who played the role of an often absent father. The relationship between Kim and Seo was not built on usefulness and pleasure. Almost the same age, they shared a lonely life and the same taste for literature. These similar backgrounds, rooted in the colonized state of the country, brought them together despite their different characters.

They also shared a great passion for poetry. Seo Jeong-ju began his public career with the poem 'The Wall' [벽, 'Byeok'], which in 1936 received the Young Writers' Prize from the Donga Daily, the newspaper that on December 24, 1933 had published his first poem 'A Request from My Mother' [어머니의 부탁, 'Eomeoni-ui butak']. Kim Dong-ri, the future great novelist, entered the literary world with the poem 'The Egret' [백로, 'Baengno'], which was published under his childhood name, Kim Si-jong, and

won the official prize in Donga Daily's 1934 Young Writers' literary contest. He eventually turned to writing novels, following Seo's remark that his prose was better than his poetry. Seo Jeong-ju recounted an anecdote from their youth in an interview with novelist Choi Il-nam, published in the magazine *Sindonga* in March of 1983. The anecdote was included in the poet Yi Si-yeong's poem 'Young Dong-ri' [젊은 동리, 'Jeolmeun Dong-ri'] in the collection *Smell of argal* [아르갈의 향기, *Argal-ui hyanggi*]:

One day, they were drinking alcohol.

Kim Dong-ri, a bit tipsy, recited one of his poems, composed over the previous night, when he could not sleep.

'Voiceless ones also cry when flowers bloom...', he declaimed.

Suddenly, Seo Jeong-ju let out a cry of admiration, slapping his thighs. You said that 'voiceless ones also cry when flowers bloom...!' From now on, I look at you as a poet.

Kim Dong-ri frowned:

'No, my friend, I wrote: voiceless ones also cry when you pinch them...'

Stunned, Seo Jeong-ju banged loudly on the coffee table and shouted:

'Enough, my friend!

That's why you should write narrative prose instead'. (Yi Si-yeong 2005: 31)

Indeed, Kim Dong-ri pronounced his verse with a strong Gyeongsan accent – 'kkochipi-myeon' (꽃이 피면, when you pinch them) – and Seo Jeong-ju heard: 'kkochi pi-myeon' (꽃이 피면, when the flowers bloom). The two sentences have different meanings but are phonetically very close. The anecdote reflects their different literary sensitivities. The novelist's phrase, 'Voiceless ones also cry when you pinch them', expresses an everyday's idea rooted in a causal link. It is not poetic. But it is poetically understood by the poet as 'Voiceless ones also cry when flowers bloom'. This misunderstanding, both literal and figurative, is often cited to explain the difference between the two friends.

While Seo Jeong-ju was a poet and a non-conformist wanderer, Kim Dong-ri was rational and sedentary. Both were keenly attracted to general culture, despite their limited education. Kim was fully self-confident and would not feel any inferiority in his ideological debates with left-wing writers (1945–1948). The dissimilarities between the two writers were blended into their friendship and transformed into a creative richness. Seo Jeong-ju's poetic creation fed into Kim Dong-ri's novels and inversely. Each saw in the other's works a part of their joint literary enterprise. Kim Dong-ri continued to write poetry, leaving some 30 posthumous poems (Yi Geun-bae 2013: 302). True, his poetry was overshadowed by the large number of novels he published. Yet this common interest in poetry helped sustain their friendship. It contributed to a spiritual kinship that rested on a genuine complicity in building contemporary Korean literature.

A mutually inspiring friendship

The contribution of Kim Dong-ri and Seo Jeong-ju to post-war Korean literature (1950–1953) and its renewal is immense. Yet no one could have imagined that it would follow from their meeting in 1933. They both drew on Korean traditions, particularly on

shamanism and Buddhism so deeply rooted in their homeland. Their common background and focus on similar themes allowed them to tirelessly reflect on the character of Korean identity. Their writings converge towards the original place of their early childhood, which provides them with essential inspiration. Kim Dong-ri focuses on his hometown, Gyeongju, the former capital of the Silla kingdom (57 BC–935), with its rich heritage of shamanism and Buddhism. He sublimates Korean shamanism in his novels *Portrait of a Woman Shaman* [무녀도, *Munyeodo*, 1936], *Loess Valley*, [황토기, *Hwangtogi*, 1939], *Eul-hwa*, *A Woman Shaman* [을화, *Eulhwa*, 1978], and claims that the soul of Koreans is rooted in shamanism, conceived as the bedrock of indigenous thought and life in the country.

Seo Jeong-ju's homeland, Jilmajae, is also the cradle of his poetic formation. In *Myths of Jilmajae* [질마재 신화, *Jilmajae sinhwa*] published in 1975 by Iljisa, he peculiarly transposes local myths with *yukjabaegi*, a kind of narrative folk song of his region, to convey a reality ruled by ruinous chaos. Jilmajae appears at the same time as a local habitat and Seo's literary archetype.

Few contemporary Korean novelists and poets have so notably captured distinctively Korean values in literature. Thanks to their extraordinary sensitivity to Korean traditions, Kim Dong-ri's *Eulhwa* was shortlisted for the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1982, while Seo Jeong-ju's poems have been repeatedly nominated for the same prize.

Kim Dong-ri and Seo Jeong-ju have extensively dealt with Buddhism in their works, particularly Buddhism in the Silla kingdom. Both were involved in the Buddhist world. In search of a quiet place to write, Kim moved to Dasol Temple in February 1935, where his elder brother Beombu took refuge a few months earlier from the Japanese police. Thanks to Beombu, who taught Asian philosophies to the monks there, he had access to a wealth of Buddhist texts and learned several sutras by heart. As the Dasol temple library could not quite satisfy his appetite for reading, he moved to the great Haein temple, where his brother also taught and where he met eminent scholars, including the monks Dobong (1873–1949) and Manhae (1879–1944). Having spent the period between summer 1935 and early 1936 there with full access to Buddhist works (Kim Jeong-suk 1996: 43), Kim returned to Dasol temple and began teaching Korean at the Gwangmyong Institute. Throughout this time, he was captivated by Buddhism and sympathized with Buddhist monks whom he found had the interest of the Korean nation at heart. Life in the temples left a permanent mark in his writing. His *Monk Solgeo* trilogy [솔거, *Solgeo*] was inspired by an ancient Buddhist painting he discovered in a ruined hermitage. Works such as *Bird of Paradise* [극락조, *Geungnakjo*, 1968], *Bird of the Afterlife* [저승새, *Jeoseungsae*, 1977], *The Story of the Transmigration of Souls* [윤회설, *Yunhoeseol*, 1946], and *Life-Size Buddha* [등신불, *Deungsinbul*, 1961] were also shaped by his Buddhist views and have the Dasol and Haein temples as their settings (Kim Dong-ri 1970: 402).

Gyeongju, Kim's hometown, is dotted with historic Buddhist sites, including the Bulguksa temple and the Seokguram Grotto, with its impressive statue of the Buddha dating back to the Silla period (57 BC – 935 AD). Kim transposed this unique Buddhist climate into his works, and tried to trace his stories back to Silla kingdom. The historical sources, tales, and legends recorded in Kim Bu-sik's *History of the Three Kingdoms* [삼국사기, *Samguksagi*, c. 1145] and in the *Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms* [삼국유사, *Samgukyusa*, c. 1281] compiled by Ilyeon, a Buddhist monk of the Goryeo dynasty (918–1392), provided the material he was looking for. His long research into the spirit of Silla

culminated with the publication of a collection of *Historical Tales* [김동리 역사소설, *Kim Dong-ri yeoksa soseol*] in 1977, depicting the lives, emotions, desires, wisdom, and dreams of the people of Silla, along with the sites of their loves and deaths (Jin Jeong-sik 1995: 457).

Seo Jeong-ju also composed several poems inspired by Buddhist thoughts. He was known to have longed for monkhood. In the summer of 1934, he took up the advice of his master, the monk Park Han-yong, and went to Mount Geumgangsan to meet the venerable monk Mangong (1871-1946), a practicing ascetic. Seo studied at the Jungang Buddhist School in Seoul, today's Dongguk University, and learned the sutras with monk Park Han-yong at the Daewonsan hermitage of Gaeunsa temple. It was there that the main focus of his poems emerged as a combination of the Buddhist principle of the transmigration of souls and Nietzsche's idea of the eternal return. After carefully studying the *History of the Three Kingdoms* and the *Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms*, he published *Silla* [신라초, *Sillacho*, 1961] and *Winter* [동천, *Dongcheon*, 1968]. These two volumes, which are considered the most representative of his poetry, build on the imaginative power of the Buddhist world (Hong Sin-seon 2000). The *Sillacho*, much like Kim Dong-ri's historical novels, yearns for eternal life and is focused on the transmigration of souls as a result of the karmic principle, one of the cores of Buddhist thought.

The similar thematic elements that inspired their works reflect their deep friendship, which becomes even more visible in their joint endeavors in the practical sphere.

Effects of their friendship: The construction of South Korean literary milieu and the training of disciples

The friendship between Kim Dong-ri and Seo Jeong-ju has been an important driving force in contemporary Korean literature. Kim, together with Seo, laid the foundations of a renewed South Korean literary milieu, which eventually developed into the federation of right-wing literary movements after the Liberation in 1945. Without his friend's support, Kim would not have felt strong and self-reliant enough to champion the value of pure literature against the idea of literature as commitment, as defended by left-wing writers. The split into pure and committed literature evident in the Korean literary scene after the Liberation reflects the violent political and ideological conflicts that opposed the right and the left; in this intellectual clash, Kim Dong-ri, Seo Jeong-ju, and Cho Yeon-hyeon (1920-1981) led the side of pure literature advocated by right-wing writers.

Kim and Seo started working together under the Japanese occupation. In November 1936, Seo founded a journal of the literary circle 'Village of Poets' (Siin-Burk). He served as editor and publisher, and invited O Jang-hwan (1918-1951), Ham Hyeong-su (1914-1946), Kim Dal-jin (1907-1989), Yeo Sang-hyeon (1914- ?)⁴, and Kim Dong-ri to contribute. The poets in this circle strove to practice pure literature based on 'humanism' and to delve into the 'ultimate purpose of existence'. This is the approach that Kim Dong-ri would build upon to elaborate his doctrine of pure literature as opposed to committed literature.

⁴He went from South to North during the Korean War (1950-1953). The year of his death is not known.

For his part, Kim Dong-ri, weary of life in Seoul and unable to afford living costs on his writer's income, returned to his homeland in 1937. There, he could not count on any financial support from his second brother Yeong-bong, whose business was dying. He therefore decided to return to the Dasol temple to join his brother Beom-bu.

Their physical distance and different lifestyles led Kim and Seo to adopt different positions regarding the Japanese colonizers. Kim began work in a grain distribution center in Sacheon in 1943, after the Gwangmyeong Institute, where he had been teaching since 1937, was shut down in 1942. This job allowed him to overcome financial hardship and escape forced labor in 1943 (Kim Dong-ri 1967: 447). In the last years of the Japanese occupation, between 1942 and 1945, Kim suspended his creative activities and declined all offers of collaboration – a choice that saved his honor. On the contrary, in 1943 Seo joined a pro-Japanese publishing house run by Choi Jae-soe (1908–1964). Serving as editor of a magazine called *Gungmin munhak* [국민문학, People's Literature], he composed pro-Japanese poems and war stories to motivate soldiers serving under the Japanese flag in the war. He was not alone in this task, as most writers consented to it; yet, it remained as an indelible stain in his biography. It seems, however, that despite these divergent choices, Kim and Seo's friendship was in no way harmed. Kim Dong-ri, who was fully acquainted with the hardships of life, never publicly criticized Seo Jeong-ju for his choices.

On August 15, 1945, Kim Dong-ri was in Sacheon when he received news of the country's liberation. Korea, now free from Japanese domination, was now facing a different state of disorder. The strife between the left and the right divided the country's politics, and was echoed in every domain of social life. As elsewhere, the conflict fiercely burst in Sacheon, and chaos supplanted anarchy. Kim Dong-ri's refusal to join the Sacheon People's Committee (인민위원회, Inmin Wiwonhoe) aroused the hostility of the left and prompted violent assaults from young activists (Kim Dong-ri 1967: 455), which only led him to further dissociate himself from their political movement. To escape further attacks, he left Sacheon for Seoul on December 20, 1945, and was accommodated by his friend Seo in Gongdeok-dong. Being back in Seoul, he assessed the ongoing situation of the literary milieu, from which he had retreated in the past few years.

The period from August 15, 1945 to August 15, 1948 were marked by American occupation in the south and by Soviet occupation in the north. Korea did not have its own government. In this unsettled context, various literary groups were formed, such as the Korean Center for Literary Construction (조선문학건설본부, Joseon Munhak Geonseol Bonbu) and the Korean League of Proletarian Writers (조선프롤레타리아문학동맹, Joseon Peuroletaria Munhak Dongmaeng), both established in 1945. These two competing left-wing organizations swiftly merged to form the League of Korean Writers (조선문학가동맹, Joseon Munhakga Dongmaeng). In opposition to the alliance of left-wing writers, the Korean Arts Association (조선문예협회, Joseon Munye Hyeophoe) and the Korean Writers Association (전조선문필가협회, Jeon Joseon Mulpilga Hyeophoe) were created, bringing together the right-wing cultural community. Yet they were barely active. So, on April 4, 1946, by initiative of Kim Dong-ri, Seo Jeong-ju, and Cho Yeon-hyeon, the Korean Association of Young Writers (조선청년문학가협회, Joseon Cheongnyeon Munhakga Hyeophoe) was founded. During his two-week stay in Seoul, Kim Dong-ri came to understand the state of the literary scene: most writers had joined the Alliance

of Korean Writers and adhered to the nationalist left. Aware of the situation, Kim gathered writers with whom he shared similar views: Cho Ji-hun (1920-1968), Cho Yeon-hyeon (1920-1981), Hwang Sun-won (1915-2000), Choe In-uk (1920-1972), Park Du-jin (1916-1998), Park Mok-wol (1916-1978), Kim Dal-jin (1907-1989), and, of course, Seo Jeong-ju. They agreed to create an organization in defense of pure literature, rejecting all political ideology. Kim Dong-ri was elected president and Seo Jeong-ju, as a member of the preparatory committee, became responsible for the poetry section. The Association, like all its members, was openly right-wing. Kim published *Sunsu munhag-ui jinui* [순수문학의 진의, The Real Meaning of Pure Literature] in the *Seoul shinmun* [서울신문, *Seoul Journal*] on September 14, 1946, to argue in favor of pure literature and to cut short what he considered to be groundless criticism against him. The pure literature whose principles he explained in this article was established on humanism.

Kim Dong-ri and Seo Jeong-ju recalled their struggle during this period in a 'New Year conversation between two leading literary figures in their 70s', organized and published on January 13, 1984 by the *Hankook Daily* under the title 'The Nation and Literature are Eternal' [민족과 문학은 영원, 'Minjok-gwa Munhag-eun Yeongwon']:

Seo: At that time, you were fighting with your critical severity against all the literary forces of the Left. You were [like a] fearless general opposing the left with invincible courage. If anyone can bear witness of your involvement, that is me.

Kim: It is not an involvement. Take the stance of humanity in any situation, this is my absolute conviction when it comes to literature and human beings. I know no other way.

Seo: Actually, by then our camp lacked the organization of the left, we were rather relying on individuals. That is why we had a hard time asserting ourselves. As for the idea that literature should be 'pure' and that it should only take the side of humanity, you and I have always been in full agreement.

Kim: As the left was proposing a politicized, violent literature, we opposed this stance by defending the place of literature. I remember that at that time I wrote *The Cave Tribe* [혈거부족, *Hyeolgeobujok*], *Loess Valley*, and *Kite Tale* [지연기, *Jiyeonggi*].

Facing the union of right-wing writers and artists, the left reacted with the support of the Communist Party. In turn, on February 12, 1947, the Federation of All-Korean Cultural Associations (전국문화단체총연합회 - 문총, Jeonguk Munhwa Danche Chong Yeonhaphoe or Munchon) was created as the first organization to bring together nationalist and liberal writers who rejected left-wing organizations and focused on cultural movements after the establishment of the Republic of Korea in 1948. Until 1961, it was the organization that relayed the official vision of literature. Im Hwa (1908-1953), the leader of the leftist writers, and his followers left for the North, depriving the confrontation between the two camps of its core purpose.

Kim Dong-ri, who was at the forefront of right-wing writers for a long time, took a key role in the literary world of his time, henceforward dominated by conservatism.

He came to cherish his double role as writer and literary leader. With the political climate of South Korean society swiftly turning to anti-Communism after the 1950-1953 war, Kim Dong-ri, who had spearheaded the dispute against the left, became a leading figure in the literary microcosm, and was soon acknowledged as a respected authority. Thanks to their fierce struggle against the Communists, Seo Jeong-ju and Cho Yeon-hyeon, like Kim Dong-ri, also became key personalities of the new literary generation. Sometimes called the 'Three Crows of South Korean literary milieu' (Ham Dong-seon 2013: 426), they have led the conservative tendency in South Korea's literary circles until the end of their lives. Their friendship was their strength, and it helped them overcome all adversities. This is why it enshrines a major achievement at a key moment in the history of Korean literature.

Yet the friendship between Kim and Seo also went through a brief period of rupture. This happened when Kim Dong-ri, Seo Jeong-ju, and Cho Yeon-hyeon found themselves at odds over the leadership of the Korean Literary Association (한국문인협회, Hanguk Munin Hyeophoe) created in 1961. The Korean literary scene in the 1950s was dominated by two associations: the Korean Writers Association (한국문학가협회, Hanguk Munhakga Hyeophoe), created in December 1949 and led by Park Jong-hwa (1901-1981, who served as its president), Kim Dong-ri, Seo Jeong-ju, and Cho Yeon-hyeon, and the Korean Free Writers Association (한국자유문학자협회, Hanguk Jayu Munhakja Hyeophoe). After Park Chung-hee's coup on May 16, 1961, both associations were forcibly dissolved and merged into a new one – the Korean Literary Association. This new body gathered prominent members of the Korean literary scene of the time, and it still does today. To avoid potential conflicts, the 68 year-old Jeon Yeong-taek (1894-1968) was chosen as its first president. In 1963, he was succeeded by Park Jong-hwa, while Kim Dong-ri became vice-president. Kim Dong-ri encouraged writers to publish in *Monthly Literature* [월간문학, *Wolgan Munhak*], a journal he created in 1968. He was elected president in 1970. Under his presidency, the Korean Literary Association flourished; but his election earned him the hostility of Seo Jeong-ju and Cho Yeon-hyeon:

The reason why these three masters turned their backs on each other stemmed from the 1970 election for president of the Korean Literary Association, when Kim Dong-ri ousted Park Jong-hwa (Woltan) and became president. At that time, the alternation of generations was intensifying in the literary world [...]. Cho Yeon-hyeon opposed Kim Dong-ri by defending Park Jong-hwa. He argued that 'we should wait for Park to be ready to step down as president; voting him out would be no reason of pride for our writers'. Midang [Seo Jeong-ju] sided with Cho Yeon-hyeon. (Ham dong-seon 2013: 426)

Despite Seo and Cho's opposition, Kim Dong-ri ousted Park Jong-hwa thanks to the overwhelming support of the majority of young writers.

After his first term, Kim Dong-ri ran for re-election in 1973 but lost to Cho Yeon-hyeon, who was supported by Seo Jeong-ju. This election extraordinarily turned old friends into adversaries. The Association, now divided into two camps, would for a long time suffer from this antagonism. Kim's pride was deeply affected after his defeat, and he fell ill. Seo Jeong-ju recalled this tense moment in 1977:

Our relationship stayed strong for 30 years, but we drifted apart after the election for president of the Korean Literary Association, about ten years ago. This was the last challenge to our friendship (Seo Jeong-ju 2013: 13).

It took two years for them to reconcile. Their reunion took place in 1975, at Seo's 60th birthday banquet at the House of New Culture:

He was not someone who would break with an old friend for this kind of reason. One summer afternoon, a year or two after that election, we found ourselves sitting opposite each other at a public gathering. Beer was served. Suddenly, looking into each other's eyes, we burst out laughing. It was impossible to hold us back. With that one long burst of laughter, we became friends again, and our bond would know no further obstacles. And so he asked me to serve as the master of ceremonies at his third son's wedding, a role he had already entrusted to me at the wedding of his eldest son (Id., *ibid.*).

There was nothing to be explained. A simple gesture was enough to dispel the disagreement caused by the presidential election at the Association and to resume with their fraternal and durable friendship. According to Kim Dong-ri, their friendship might even have its roots in a 'previous world', designating the two friends as *kindred spirits*:

Since the fall of 1936, we shared the same thoughts on life and literature, the state and the nation, even our conception of the world. What is more, we enjoyed drinking, loved women, and cherished freedom in very much the same way. This happened quite naturally, with no need to be pushed or supported by the other. This is why I am wondering whether it would not be a bond from a previous world. (Kim Dong-ri 2013a: vol. XXVI, 112)

Bound together by their natural like-mindedness, Kim and Seo were enthusiastic about their mission with their disciples, as professors and members of the review committee for *Munye* [문예, *Literature and Art*], the journal through which most young writers made their careers. Seo Jeong-ju discovered talented poets such as Park Jaesam (1933–1997), and he worked hard to support young poets who looked for literary recognition. Kim Dong-ri brought together all his poet friends at the Department of Creative Writing, Faculty of Arts, Seorabeol University to train 500 future poets and novelists. According to Park Gyeong-ri (1926–2008), the author of *Land* [토지, *Toji*], a masterpiece in the history of Korean novel, Kim Dong-ri trained or influenced most of today's active writers. The path he opened continues to be followed by many Korean writers today.

Conclusion

Friendship is a common practice in Korean literary circles. The friendship between Kim Dong-ri and Seo Jeong-ju may serve as a model for today's writers, but its intensity and depth make it a singular case in the history of Korean literature. It spanned more than sixty years and withstood the vicissitudes of time. Their different choices

during the last years of the Occupation and the disagreement prompted by the presidential election of the Korean Literary Association in the early 1970s were possibly the toughest challenges to their relationship. Yet they overcame them. Their friendship was marked by brotherly love, mutual respect, and a thorough knowledge of each other's worlds.

Kim Dong-ri praised Seo Jeong-ju's talent and free mind with these words:

Love and respect for him were my only spiritual source. His personality led him to act freely and without constraint from others; his free poetic spirit was already visible in his first volume *Flower Snake* [화사집, *Hwasajip*]. Anyone who knows poetry, no matter if they like it or not, could not ignore the place and radiance of this star against the background of our thought. (Kim Dong-ri 1948: 65)

Seo Jeong-ju, in turn, sees Kim as a perfect man: 'If we look for someone who only acts for the *absolute*, I believe that Kim Dong-ri might be the first under heaven' (Seo Jeong-ju 2013: 13). Their intimate acquaintance is also expressed in the funeral inscription that Seo composed in 1996, a year after his friend passed away:

The fondest Korean writer,
Who refused to let anything go,
Wholly an aesthete, who was daily aching for beautiful things,
Oh, what a rainbow of extraordinary beauty,
Who appeared in the fallen capital after the ruin of the kingdom of Silla.
(Park Mun-jae 2013: 146)

The death of these two men within five years of each other has left a huge void in the Korean literary world. Certainly, there is no shortage of talent there. But we doubt that a friendship worthy of theirs will see the light of day again any time soon.

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