The “Modernology” of Pak Tae-won: Glimpses of 1930s Seoul

ABSTRACT

Weaving together interviews with Daniel Pak and formalist readings of Kubo and Ch’onggye Stream, this essay attempts to reflect the complexity and richness of Pak Tae-won’s literary tapestry, his multi-layered and penetrating portraits of the rapidly modernizing colonial city he so dearly loved. What comes through perhaps most powerfully in these works is Pak’s empathy for the powerless and marginalized—especially women—as well as his keen insight into the tensions and contradictions that made Seoul both a cruel and alluring city. Highlighting the uneasy coexistence of the feudal and the modern, and the increasing inequalities wrought by the forces of materialism, Kubo and Ch’onggye Stream lucidly and imaginatively reveal the pains and joys, aspirations and disappointments, that constituted life for Seoulites in the 1930s.

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INTRODUCTION

“He loved Seoul—then Kyŏngsŏng—so much. [. . .] Kubo (Pak Tae-won) was a native Seoulite. He loved to observe the lives of ordinary people in Seoul, wandering its streets with a notebook under his arm.” (Daniel Pak)

Generous, affable, and, above all, dedicated to preserving his father’s literary heritage, Mr. Daniel Pak smiles good-naturedly when speaking of the kindly father he knew as a boy, a man with thick eyeglasses who was writing constantly to meet ever-looming deadlines. Extremely fond of music, he taught Daniel and his siblings to sing and, at the end of a school day, he loved to share Korean folktales with his children and their friends. It has been over sixty years since Daniel last saw the author of the beloved literary works of the 1930s, A Day in the Life of Kubo the Novelist (Sosŏlga Kubo Ssi ŭi iril) and Scenes from Ch’onggye Stream (Cheon Byeon Pung Gyeong); and it has been twenty-five years since Pak Tae-won died in Pyongyang. In spite of—and, likely, due to—the many years and lingering wounds of Korea’s traumatic twentieth-century, Daniel continues to see Seoul as a captivating palimpsest, the frenetic pace and glitter of the contemporary city existing side-by-side with the colonial Kyŏngsŏng of streetcars, coffeehouses, and bars immortalized by his father. Much as James Joyce (an important influence for Pak) sensitively rendered colonial Dublin and its many vicissitudes in works like The Dubliners and Ulysses, Pak’s Kubo and Ch’onggye Stream portray a lively and variegated Kyŏngsŏng—a city with inhabitants of diverse classes and occupations, one with myriad lures and temptations for the artist as a young man, but also one riddled by stagnation, poverty, and frustrated aspirations. From the modernist, avant-garde aesthetic of Kubo to the naturalist panorama of Ch’onggye Stream, Pak Tae-won’s fascination with the rapidly—and awkwardly—modernizing city has left us with two discerning, intricate, and compassionate artifacts reflecting the pains, joys, and complexities of life for Seoulites in the 1930s.

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2 Daniel Pak was born in 1942, about eight years before his father defected to the North.
3 Due to his extremely poor eyesight, Pak Tae-won was sometimes called “Uncle Eye,” a nickname used to address Kubo by the nephews of a friend he runs into (Kubo 181-82). For the last ten years of his life he was blind.
4 Kyŏngsŏng was the name of Seoul under the Japanese Occupation.
On a pleasant October morning, I met Daniel at the Seongbuk Museum of Art, situated in the quiet, leafy neighborhood of northern Seoul. We were there to visit the exhibition “Memories and Traces of Seongbuk Artists,” memorializing the large number of artists who, like his father, lived in the area at one time or another.\(^5\) Over tea next door to the museum, in the former home of Korean poet and writer Lee Tae-jun, Daniel spoke for several hours about Pak Tae-won’s life and art, as well as the precious memories he retains from the years before his father’s defection to the North. Born in 1909, in the area now known as Susong Dong, “Kubo,” as Daniel tends to call his father, “was part of an enlightened and significantly westernized family, with his uncle a modern medical doctor and his father a pharmacist.” When he was quite young, Pak’s family moved to a home just a few steps from the Gwanggyo Bridge over Ch’onggye Stream—a location that would furnish much of the material for his novel of the same name. Always an avid reader, as a child Pak enjoyed telling his friends and family stories based upon the novels he was reading. Recognizing that his “talent in literature was exceptional,” Pak’s parents and uncle actively supported his ambitions, apprenticing him to the novelist Choonwon Lee Kwang Soo when he was a student at Kyung Sung Cheil Gobo (now Kyung Gi High School); and they also “encouraged Kubo to get tutoring from BaekHwa Yang Gun Shik, who was a master of Chinese literature.” It was at this time that Pak began translating works of literature from English to Korean, including short stories by Earnest Hemingway and Katherine Mansfield. Along with his love for literature, “Kubo was able to gain medical knowledge from his uncle (Dr. Park Yong Nam) and by reading medical books”—this interest in medicine and pathology providing notable texture to *Kubo* and *Ch’onggye Stream*. At the age of 19, Pak’s father passed away, which meant that “he lived in a household with many females, including his mother, aunt, and cousin, as well as a nanny, housekeeper, and maid.” In 1930, he embarked on his only trip away from the Korean peninsula, going to Hōsei University in Japan, where he studied English literature and spent his leisure-time visiting coffeehouses, watching movies, taking long strolls, and meeting with Japanese and Korean artists and writers. Among his formative experiences in Tokyo was reading a Japanese translation of Joyce’s *Ulysses*, a book that directly inspired *Kubo*’s diurnal structure, as well as its focus on the young artist’s attempts to find happiness and human connection in a seemingly infertile colonial city. While “Kubo appreciated the

\(^5\) Pak Tae-won lived with his family in the Seongbuk area from 1947 to 1950.
cosmopolitanism of Japan, its openness towards Western ideas and literature, he began to feel bitter about the Japanese colonization of his country.” This was due, in large part, to the fact that he felt “Korea was less advanced than Japan, and that Seoul was small and underdeveloped compared to Tokyo.” Upon his return from Japan eighteen months later, Pak devoted his energy to writing—“his way of fighting back against the colonization of his country”—documenting what Kubo’s narrator calls “his country, so poor” (186) and the struggle of its residents to forge a life. Sustaining and nurturing his literary work at this time was his close friendship with Yi Sang, owner of the coffeehouse “Swallow” in Gwanghwamun, and his membership in the Kuinhoe (Group of Nine) with Korean writers such as Lee Tae-jun, Yi Hyo-sok, Yi Mu-yong, Jeong Ji-yong, and Kim Gi-rim. In 1934, Pak Tae-won’s modernist masterpiece, the novella A Day in the Life of Kubo the Novelist, was serialized in the newspaper Chungang Ilbo. And, as a smiling Daniel said, “on the very day the last installment of Kubo appeared, my father and mother were engaged.”

**PAK TAE-WON’S KYŏNGSŎNG**

“At last the boy arrived in Seoul, fulfilling his most ardent yearning.” *(Ch’onggye Stream 27)*

Pak Tae-won’s first three decades took place amidst an unprecedented population growth in Seoul, making him part of the first generation of Koreans to experience the phenomenon of urbanization. With the rapid changes in technology, economic and social relations, and geography, his writings of the 1930s bear witness to the unique status Seoul held in the Korean consciousness. Fascinated by the multitudes that lived there—and the continuous stream of immigrants who were arriving daily—Pak sought to provide literary form for the complex networks linking individuals of different classes, occupations, and genders in the ever-expanding

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6 According to Daniel Pak, the Swallow coffeehouse was located was located in “Pi Mat Gol, right behind what is today the Kyobo building in Gwanghwamun.”
7 See Oh Saeng-Keun, “Seoul and ‘Seoulites’ (351)
colonial city.\(^8\) One dimension of the new urban experience, as we see in *Ch’onggye Stream*, is just how novel the city’s two- and three-story buildings appeared to Koreans from rural areas. For Ch’ang Su, a boy from the village of Kap’yong sent to the city to work for the herbalist, his first glimpses of Seoul nearly overwhelm his senses, “fulfilling his most ardent yearning” (27). Through the window of his bus, he gazes joyously at “the thing called ‘streetcar’” (27) and, after disembarking, he continues to be entranced by the kinetic energy of the city’s automobiles and bicycles, the mass of humanity milling about on a non-market day—not to mention the tall buildings “two and three stories high, with so many signboards on them” (27). The surfeit of sensory stimulation makes even Ch’onggye Stream seem wondrous to the boy: “The sounds, the sights, all struck him as amazing. No one would consider the scenes along the Ch’onggye Stream beautiful, but they filled him with a thrill because he was in Seoul now” (29).

At the “Chongno Street intersection” (28), Ch’ang Su sets his eyes upon a focal point of 1930s Kyŏngsŏng, the Hwasin Department Store, which, to his unaccustomed eyes, signifies an apotheosis of human achievement. He imagines himself riding up the elevator that took you all the way up to the top of the buildings, three stories, four stories high, even without you moving at all. According to his friend, Sugil, if you felt slightly dizzy, it was because you were not used to riding it. “If you shut your eyes tight, no problem,” he had said. (30)

That the thought of a mere elevator could elicit such a sense of disorientation suggests how radically new “modern” Kyŏngsŏng appeared to the so-called “country bumpkin.” But even for those Seoulites habituated to such innovations, the Hwasin occupies a principal axis of the modern urban experience, and the modern selves that individuals craft for themselves.\(^9\) In Pak’s city, the Hwasin is a privileged icon, but, at the same time, it functions as a sharp reminder of the differences between the haves and have-nots. Unlike the traditional Namdaemun market, where

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\(^8\) According to Soon-won Park: “From the mid-1920s to the early 1940s, the population of Kyŏngsŏng increased more than threefold, from 343,000 in 1925 to nearly 1,114,000 in 1942, and the number of households grew 2.5 times, from 76,000 in 1932 to 192,000 in 1942, for two reasons: a continuous inflow of new migrants, both Korean and Japanese, and the expansion of the administrative boundaries of the city” (“Colonial Industrial Growth” 137).

\(^9\) According to Andrei Lankov, the Hwasin was one of several department stores that appeared in Seoul in the 1920s and 1930s. The Hwasin, though, held a privileged place in the Korean consciousness, as it was the sole department store owned by a Korean, the businessman and entrepreneur, Pak Hŭng-sik (*The Dawn of Modern Korea* 203). “The store was opened in 1932,” Lankov writes, “and in 1937 it acquired a large new building which instantly became a prominent city landmark” (203).
Kubo strolls looking for “A little joy” only to find “a few baggage carriers listlessly squatting on either side of the path” (162), the Hwasin provides a clean, shiny, and orderly shopping experience. With its aisles stocked by expensive, imported merchandise, it is, above all, a space for browsing—as we see in Kubo’s brief visit to the store (151-52). And precisely because these goods are beyond the financial means of most of its visitors, it serves as a repository of hopes for all the Seoulites who, in Kubo’s terms, dream of a “happiness” that eludes their grasp. As we see with Kubo’s uncertain first steps of the day, it is almost as if the store exerts its own magnetism upon the modern urban dweller: “He walks toward the Chongno intersection. He has no business there. Only that his right foot, randomly put forth, happened to veer leftward. [. . .] Before he notices it, his foot steps into the department store” (150-51). Inside, Kubo seems to do little more than ride the elevator up and down, but this lack of purpose reinforces the sense that the Hwasin, with its novelty and shiny commodities, creates its own vortex, luring Seoulites to it despite themselves. For Hanako, the former barmaid engaged to the son of a local pharmacist, her trip to the Hwasin for bridal goods, with one hundred won in her pocket, is described as a “rare opportunity for pleasure” (Ch’onggye Stream 210). It is an occasion for her—and, vicariously, for her close friends Kimiko and Kumsun—to shop in the expensive, “well-known store” and project to the world an image of happiness and privilege:

Hwasin Department Store restaurant was not a place designed for unhappy or sad people. It was for those who could afford to enjoy some peace and occasional happiness in their lives. The customers came with wives, friends, and in most cases with their children. They arrived and left discreetly, not for the purpose of drawn-out, boisterous partying. On this particular day, Hanako and her friends judged themselves to be even happier and richer than anyone else in the restaurant. (211)

Enabled to rub shoulders with the Hwasin’s well-heel ed customers—and dine in its restaurant with their considerable booty—the three young women are filled with mirth because, for once, they have the capital to buy some “peace” and “happiness.” Money has allowed them to reinvent

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10 Perhaps the most poignant anecdote provided by Daniel was the special occasion when his father took him to the restaurant of the Hwasin Department Store for naengmyeon (cold noodles). The author ordered a double-serving for himself, and a single-serving for Daniel: “He told me that when I got big, I could have a double-serving for myself.” To this day, Daniel avoids eating naengmyeon.

11 According to Lankov, “The tradition of restaurant sections in department stores was also born in the 1930s when eateries appeared in all Seoul department stores. At the time, dining out was a rare luxury almost unheard of in Korea. In order to attract shoppers, the department store diners did not charge much: a mere 70 chon or 0.70 won procured a substantial meal” (204).
themselves, to gain access to fantasies that have heretofore been denied to them due to economic privation and their low social standing.

While the mostly objective and non-judgmental narrator of *Ch’onggye Stream* does not comment on the qualitative dimension of these girls’ happiness, the more critical and subjective voice of *Kubo* repeatedly draws attention to the alienating effect caused by the hybridity of the colonial metropolis. That is, the uneasy coexistence of the new (signified by the Hwasin) and the traditional (a site like Namdaemun) lays bare the burgeoning materialistic impulses of modern Seoulites. And this increasing emphasis upon consumer goods and material accumulation is treated as an obstacle preventing the average individual from making meaningful human connections. For *Kubo*, who obsessively scorns all the “vulgar” types showing off their wealth, it also seems to be at the heart of the current malaise dampening his creative impulses. Thinking of a particular girl who desired “an 18K gold watch at a local pawnshop,” *Kubo*, in a moment inflected by self-pity, “wonders just how much he would need to be happy” (157). And shortly thereafter, at the coffeehouse, *Kubo* contemplates the joy of traveling abroad, only to resign himself to his lack of means: “That is a happiness only time and money can offer” (158). Over coffee at Kyŏngsŏng Station with “A slow classmate from his junior high school days” and his pretty girlfriend, *Kubo* wonders how this “second son of a pawnshop owner” (165) has been able to attract her: “It must be the gold, of course. Women easily find happiness in gold. At once pitying and resenting her, *Kubo* is suddenly seized with envy for the man’s wealth” (166). *Kubo*’s contradictory feelings of desire and contempt reflect his inability to find a personal happiness, but they also point to a more general phenomenon among Pak’s Seoulites: the growing wealth of the city, and its unequal distribution, engenders desires that it perpetually defers. While commodity fetishism seems characteristic of any emerging modern society, Pak’s finesse lies in his ability to constellate *Kubo*’s frustrations and solipsism with a collective consciousness whose desires have been alienated by the forces of capital. Just as *Kubo*’s pathological meditations on material gain have distorted his notions of happiness and infected his aesthetic, so too has his city’s vision of the “good life” been perverted by the false promises of the commodity.
The happiness of Hanako and her friends in the Hwasin, when juxtaposed with the grinding struggle for existence experienced by the majority of Pak’s characters, comes to seem hollow and imminently fleeting. In a similar manner, many of the other prominent sites of 1930s Seoul are, despite their promises of wealth and adventure, mirth and companionship, permeated with a sense of emptiness and loneliness. The coffeehouse, at “about two in the afternoon,” is filled with “jobless types sitting around on cane chairs” (Kubo 157), men who “look already world-wearied,” “despite their youth” (158). Along with its “jobless types,” “mostly gold mine brokers” (164), the passengers waiting at Kyŏngsŏng Station, many of whom suffer from various physical deformities, provide “no human warmth” (163). Gwanghwamun Avenue, in the early evening, is described as “deserted and inelegantly broad” (179), leading Kubo to decide that, unlike Tokyo, “Seoul is small” (177). And it is particularly at night that Kubo accentuates the voids of the modern experience. When the daytime crowds and their manic, stupor-inducing energy dissipate, at the time when all the “loose women” (173) appear on the street, Kubo tarries closest to abject loneliness. He asks himself, connecting the emptiness of Gwanghwamun with the memory of his failed romance in Tokyo: “My God . . . How can a man’s heart feel so lonely and wretched, on these broad, open streets of Kwanghwamun” (180). For the Korean flâneur and the newly-arrived boy from the country, the life and energy of the city promise ever-more novelty and stimulation, but its repeated failure to live up to their “most ardent yearning” has the tendency to elicit jaundice and cause paralysis.

Despite their disparate styles and forms, both Kubo and Ch’onggye Stream reflect the contradictions of a traditional Confucian society and the desire for greater social liberation accompanying the process of rapid modernization. Pak’s colonial Kyŏngsŏng, with its inequalities, aspirations, and disappointments, its cruelty and compassion, thus becomes a literary tableau of richness and complexity, one that lucidly and imaginatively contains all these contradictions. With some characters looking hopefully to the future, and others clinging tenaciously to the past, Kubo and Ch’onggye Stream bear witness to a city of stasis and flux. Lamenting and affirming the plight of Seoulites struggling to make a life, these two texts

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12 Daniel said that his father did indeed have such a relationship with a girl in Japan. However, no one has ever been able to discover who she actually was.
emphasize the irrepressible need for happiness and fulfillment, as well as the forces that stand in
the way.

A Day in the Life of Kubo the Novelist

A novelist requires all kinds of knowledge. . . . Kubo suddenly thinks of going somewhere,
maybe even just to the Sŏsomun area, for the sake of his writing. For so long he’s been lazy in
his modernology. (Kubo 160)

Pak Tae-won’s most famous work makes use of a stream of consciousness technique, which
Daniel likens to a “camera-eye,” to present a quasi-surrealistic picture of the Seoul cityscape and
the young artist’s attempt to find “happiness” in it. And similar to the tradition forged by
Western writers of the city—those like Poe, Baudelaire, and Joyce—Kubo’s eponymous hero
registers the shocks, jolts, and vicissitudes of the crowd as it ebbs and flows one summer’s day.
Bearing a “walking stick in one hand and a notebook in the other” (151), Kubo sets off with no
definite intent other than observing and recording his impressions of the city and its inhabitants.
But Kubo’s task as a modern writer, transforming the raw materials of the city into art, is subject
to blockages and self-doubt that seem to be partly engendered by the abundance of stimulations.
“With this head of mind, with this body, how much work will I ever accomplish” (160-61), Kubo
asks himself at one point, overwhelmed by the people who “come and go, in a hurry, at work”
(160). Kubo’s spleen (to borrow a term from Baudelaire), as well as his writer’s block, thus
seems to stem from the fast pace and erratic rhythms of the city itself, which make it increasingly
difficult to imaginatively and empathetically engage with its citizens. “It’s only proper that an
urban novelist should be well-acquainted with gates of the city” (163), Kubo says elsewhere, but
as the gates demarcate a prior, pre-modern Seoul, it seems clear that a more vital and responsive
aesthetic sensibility is needed, one capable of transcending the external realities produced in the
rapid process of urbanization. And the key to imaginatively exceeding prefabricated forms and
outdated types, Pak suggests, is for Kubo to cultivate, in the face of the city’s bustle and
impersonality, a greater capacity for empathy. For only in this way will he find some measure of
that elusive “happiness” in art and life.
The vast majority of *Kubo* follows the titular character as he roams the streets of the city from late in the morning until two in the evening. Around noon, the twenty-six year-old novelist leaves the house near Ch'onggye Stream, where he lives with his mother, and proceeds, through the Gwanggyo district to the Hwasin Department Store in Jongno. After his visit to the Hwasin, Kubo jumps on a streetcar—“he feels sad and lonely at the thought of being left behind” (152)—where he sees the woman his mother has proposed for him as a fiancée. Failing to pursue “that happiness for which he so yearns,” and which “might have departed forever with her” (155), he descends in front of the Chosŏn Bank, and goes into the coffeehouse “Blanc Parlor”—a locale he visits multiple times during the day—to drink coffee, smoke cigarettes, and jot notes. From the coffeehouse, he wanders through the “scorching midsummer sun” (160) to Namdaemun market in an abortive attempt to find “A Little joy” (162). “Feeling lonely, Kubo thinks he wants to go where people are, where crowds are lively” (162), and settles upon Kyŏngsŏng Station. Appalled to discover that the third-class waiting room, with its poverty and disease, “is just where loneliness dwells” (163), Kubo is further “irritated” (165) when he runs into his former junior high classmate (the pawnshop owner’s son) and his pretty girlfriend who are awaiting a train to Wŏlmi island for a picnic. Following coffee with the two, Kubo, in a fit of near-despair, telephones a poet-friend who works as a newspaper journalist, begging him to meet at the Blanc Parlor. Barely listening to the friend’s discourse on Western literature, and summarily dismissing “the friend’s oration on *Ulysses*” (171), Kubo eventually parts ways with him and finds himself standing at the Jongno intersection, “gazing at the twilight, as well as the loose women who usually appear at this time on the streets” (173). Kubo then goes to the teahouse owned by another poet-friend (Yi Sang), and the two share a dinner of *Sŏlŏngt’ang*, during which time he mentally rehearses his failed relationship in Tokyo. Making plans to rejoin this friend around ten o’clock, Kubo, lonely and morose, “Randomly walk[s]” on the “deserted and inelegantly broad street” (179) that is Gwanghwamun Avenue, continuing to reproach himself for his inability to pursue love with the girl from Japan. Finally, the friend returns, and they set off for a night of drinking in Nagwŏnjŏng. Surrounded by bargirls, Kubo drinks heartily until he is struck by the memory of a poor widow, dressed in white mourning clothes, and decides to

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13 The first two sections of the novella, entitled “The Mother” and “The Son,” give an account of the previous day from the perspective of Kubo’s mother.
14 Today’s Seoul Station.
15 This friend is based on the poet Kim Gi-rim.
return home to his mother. He tells himself that he will rededicate himself to writing and focus on bringing happiness to others, especially his mother:

Maybe, now, he wants to think more of his mother’s happiness than of his own. He is preoccupied, perhaps, with that alone. Kubo walks along the street in the soft and drizzling rain, hastening home. Perhaps, now, if his mother broaches the subject of marriage, Kubo may not flatly reject her wishes. (194)

With this ambiguously hopeful conclusion, Kubo appears to abandon his solipsistic search for happiness and prepare himself to develop a new aesthetic sensibility, one based on openness to others. He “will write a truly good novel” (193), one that, in its awareness of the debilitating limitations of solipsism and self-pity, may come to resemble a novel(la) like *Kubo*.

*Kubo* conveys the frenetic and disorienting pace of life by adopting a narrative voice whose impressions are filtered directly through Kubo, a technique that mimetically inscribes the artist’s subjective impressions of the city, while subjectifying and distorting the images of people he comes across.16 This disorientation is thus reflected in Kubo’s apparent lack of direction and purpose for the vast majority of his day.17 From the moment he sets out on his peripatetic odyssey, Kubo seems to gain a momentum and material impulse from the streets themselves: “He has been walking, seemingly with a purpose, but now he stops. Where now? He can go anywhere. There is nowhere for him to go” (149). But even when there is “nowhere for him to go,” he ineluctably goes on: in this case, afflicted by “an acute headache” (149) while “standing idle by the [Kwanggyo] bridge” (150), Kubo’s feet soon begin moving because of the “senselessness” (150) of simply standing there. This aimlessness may be explained, prosaically, by his lack of a regular job—something that worries his mother to no end—but it also reveals the city’s restless energy, which Kubo struggles to parry, harness, and transmute for aesthetic ends. Inspiring and frustrating his creative impulses, the city is a rather fickle muse—in large part, we

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16 The narrative voice tends to oscillate between the third and first person, a movement which often collapses the distance between the narrator and narrated. To give just one example already cited: “After a While Kubo decides to walk again. The scorching midsummer sun on his bare head has made him dizzy. He can’t stay there standing like that. Neurasthenia. Of course, it’s not just his nerves breaking down. With this head of mine, with this body, how much work will I ever accomplish—” (160-61).

17 Apart, of course, from his highly symbolic return home at the end of the novella.
come to suspect, because of his short-sighted and antagonistic attitude toward it. That is, the narrative tends to myopically and pathologically hone its vision on the disenchanted aspects of the city—the goiters, palsy, and nephritis of Kyŏngsŏng Station; the “vulgar” materialists in the bars and coffeehouses; the “loose women” of Gwanghwamun—and then use them to amplify Kubo’s feelings of loneliness and disappointment. The message, then, seems to be that Kubo must find a more sympathetic and understanding manner of engaging with the city; his current disappointment in life and art will only be bridged when he ceases to take himself as the sole point of reference. On the other hand, it also seems plausible to understand Kubo’s self-pity and ambivalence towards the city as the product of a messy and contradictory colonial modernity—one that appears to stress material prosperity at the expense of creativity, imagination, and kindness. But if we set aside, for a moment, Kubo’s struggle to find sufficiency and fulfillment, we can appreciate the suppleness with which Pak discloses the restless vitality of life in the city, the rhythms and momentum that it creates. Kubo’s “Where now?” (160) seems to embody the modern condition in 1930s Kyŏngsŏng: there is always somewhere to go, even when there is nowhere to go; and there is a virtually endless supply of fuel to propel one there, wherever that may be. Pak’s city, vibrant and alive, shabby and oppressive, is replete with disappointment for Kubo, but not even this jaded young novelist can escape its irresistible allures.

**Scenes from Ch’onggye Stream**

“When he stepped out the door, there was Ch’onggye Stream. The daily life at Ch’onggye Stream was thus very familiar to him from an early age. He lived on the second floor of a building near the Gong Ae Dang Pharmacy, which was run by his father, Pak Yong Hwan. From his home, he could hear conversation among the women washing clothes in Ch’onggye Stream. He would also make visits to the Lee Un Kyung barbershop [a prominent locus of activity in *Ch’onggye Stream*] across the Mogyo Bridge, taking notes there on the comings and goings of the residents of Ch’onggye Stream. He was so interested in the Seoulites living in Ch’onggye Stream area that he wrote the novel *Scenes from Ch’onggye Stream* and published it in the literary magazine *Jo Gwang*.” (Daniel Pak)

*Scenes from Ch’onggye Stream*, in style, form, and ambition, differs significantly from *Kubo*. A novel-length work, composed of fifty vignettes documenting the happenings of nearly seventy characters, its single unifying principle seems to be Ch’onggye Stream itself. With the majority
of its characters taken from the lower and middle classes, Pak’s panoramic depiction of one year along the stream reveals complex social webs woven and rewoven through acts of kindness and cruelty, as well as the ubiquitous gossip and humor that give life here its particular flavor. The circular structure of the novel, which begins and ends in the month of March, is reflected, thematically, in its lack of climax or clear resolution for most of the characters; with its discerning awareness of the patterns and rhythms of life along the stream, we close the book with the sense that life will continue on, more or less the same. From loquacious washerwomen to cunning concubines, well-to-do herbalists and pharmacists to beggars living under the Kwanggyo Bridge, malicious mother-in-laws to kindhearted bargirls, contemptible rakes to industrious chestnut vendors and child laborers, and from abusive husbands to their abused wives, the tapestry weaved in *Ch’onggye Stream* is marvelous in its diversity and particularity. But at the same time, the novel feels somewhat universal in its illumination of the aspirations that motivate any human endeavor. Like *Kubo*, *Ch’onggye Stream* reveals the uneasy coexistence of the feudal and modern in 1930s Seoul, as well as the ways in which the forces of materialism distort individuals and alienate their desire. But in its empathetic rendering of so many different Seoulites—and all their hopes and dreams—*Ch’onggye Stream* provides us with the penetrating and sensitive insight into average Seoulites that Kubo, for the most part, was unable to.

Just about every resident of Ch’onggye Stream is focused, in some manner, on material gain, but perhaps the most vulgar character is Mr. Min, the caddish, unsuccessful politician with a gambling problem and a capricious concubine. With poor luck at the game of mahjong, exhausted “by his demanding campaign schedules during the day,” and riddled with “painful thoughts of his concubine at night” (60)—he has recently discovered her “in her undergarments sprawled on the maru, laughing with the college student while listening to a gramophone” (51)—Mr. Min, over the course of the year, loses the election for city council, takes up with a kisaeng, and eventually buys a house for his pregnant concubine. This character, while, we suspect, an object of derision for the narrator, nevertheless seems to embody a specific type of individual created by Korean modernity. Attempting to emulate Japanese style by wearing an “Inverness
cape” (30), Mr. Min artlessly and unsuccessfully seeks sensual pleasures and the esteem of others. Unlike the majority of characters, this man has sufficient money, but his expenditures leave him dissatisfied, exhausted, and looking foolish because his attempts at happiness inevitably follow prefabricated images of it. For instance, when the narrator tells us that “He was not a virile man even at ordinary times” (58), it becomes apparent that the desire to have a concubine is not his own; instead, it stems from a need to project a socially-constructed image of prosperity and contentment. And thus, as Ch’onggye Stream shows, a man like Mr. Min shall never be satisfied or at ease.

Running alongside characters like Mr. Min—and even more reprehensible, abusive adulterers, such as Mandori’s father and Hanako’s husband—are the vibrant images of the stream and the changing moods of Seoul itself. The novel opens with the local washerwomen struggling in the frigid, dirty water to clean the clothes of their employers and families:

March cold could crack a giant earthenware pot, the saying goes, and the icy wind sweeping occasionally across the stream felt even more frigid for this time of the year. However, on the bank of the stream, where women gathered to do their laundry, the warmth of the midday sun kept their hands from becoming numb in the water. (1)

To pass the time, the women banter about the cost of herring, rent, and fabric, their worries about having sufficient kimchi; they complain about the noise made by children playing nearby, and gossip about local kisaengs and the marital relations of couples in the neighborhood. Their concerns are ordinary and, at times, petty, but Pak conveys the sense that this chatter provides an essential release-mechanism for them, one that embodies a simultaneous acceptance and defiance of their lot in life. Quick to criticize and quick to sympathize, these washerwomen become something like a Greek chorus in Ch’onggye Stream, commenting indefatigably, if impotently, on the justice and injustice of the life around them.

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18 In a footnote, the translator of Ch’onggye Stream writes: “Inverness capes, originating in Scotland and made famous by Sherlock Holmes, became popular among Japanese men during the 1930s. Some Korean men followed the trend” (30).
19 An example of the labile nature of their moods comes when Mandori’s mother, newly arrived at Ch’onggye Stream, is decried by the women for “doing colored wash upstream” (5), which they fear will ruin their own washing. But taking note of “Her stammer and awkward manner,” their “sympathy” turns to her, and they even convince the owner of the spring-water fountain, Mr. Kim, to let her leave without paying.
As the “March cold” sets a certain tone to life, guiding its patterns and furnishing topics of conversations, the arrival of the rainy season brings out a new face of Ch’onggye Stream. Up to this point in the summer, the stream’s residents have suffered and sweated through unrelenting heat—“people went about the dusty asphalt streets panting”—while records are set for ice consumption: “The heavens seemed to favor only people like Chomryong, the ice cream vendor, but did not bless others with rain” (155). But with little warning, “At the end of another oppressive day, the sky finally broke open in the evening. Windless in the beginning, the rain came down gently, noiselessly at first, like a spring drizzle that urges the flowers to bloom. This was the start of the summer rainy season” (156). As the rain picks up intensity, we see a variety of characters quietly contemplating it from the comfort of their homes, while the courtyard of Ippuni’s mother’s home floods, leading her to exclaim: “Damn this rain!” (157). The beggars, who have “gathered under the Kwangchunggyo Bridge” (156) for shelter, though, “suffered even more” (157). Waking to discover that “their mats had already been soaked through” (158), the three scamper about, collecting their belongings, and then climb up the ladder at the laundry area. “Drenched with pouring rain,” these unfortunates appear like “sewer mice” as they “shivered huddling together under the eaves of a house along the stream” (158). However, having forgotten their “precious” wood box, containing the “remains of dead animals, vipers, lizards, moles, and others” (159), the beggars undertake a precarious and arduous retrieval mission, which comes to its successful conclusion just as the water “reached up to the drainage pipes on the wall” (159). And when morning comes, the residents emerge from their homes, “unmindful of the rain” (159), to watch the young men—“champions” with “considerable skill” (160)—retrieve objects from the stream with long bamboo poles:

Each time something new swept downstream—such items as a broken gourd dipper, a smashed fedora, an orange carton, or a tin pail—the spectators broke into cheers. Soon the wind died down, and the rain changed to a calm drizzle. It would take another half day for the water to recede. (160)

In the concluding chapter of the novel, “Scenes from Ch’onggye Stream,” the narrator wraps up some of the loose ends, while making it apparent that the rhythms of life will continue on, largely impervious to the shocks and tragedies that particular individuals may experience. For Chae Bong, the barbershop boy, his long-deferred wish of seeing the dry goods store owner’s
fedora blow off his head is finally fulfilled; and he watches with glee as one of the beggars claims it as his own:

The onlookers who had gathered along the stream lingered on, watching gleefully the capering of the beggar, now wearing the fedora at a jolly angle, and mimicking Charlie Chaplain.
The arrival of Ipchun, the first day of spring, was only a few days away, and they felt the midday sun a bit warmer. Or was it just their wishful thinking? (312)

This somewhat irreverent, somewhat ambivalent, ending reinforces the idea that the people of Ch’onggye Stream will continue to adapt to the fickle moods of their city, relishing the small, out of the ordinary events that prevent life from becoming too monotonous. No one’s “most ardent yearning” has been fulfilled, but this seems to be precisely Pak’s point. With struggle and disappointment an unavoidable feature of life, his characters, the majority of whom are the victims of Seoul’s colonial modernity, evince a great capacity to endure the inequities of life—and sometimes even smile in the face of them.

**Social Contradiction and Class Inequality**

“He had great compassion for the poor and disadvantaged of Seoul—he was very aware of the economic disparities that existed—and wanted to help them. However, I don’t think Kubo was a proponent of left-wing revolution, nor was he particularly interested in Marxist doctrine.” (Daniel Pak)

While *Kubo* tends to focus on the young artist’s search for an elusive, personal “happiness,” Kubo’s emotional state is significantly inflected by his encounters with Seoul’s misfortunate and impoverished. Briefly stopping in the street to speak with “one of his old buddies from childhood” who “has had a hard lot in life,” and who “looks so shabby in his ramie overcoat, white rubber shoes, and straw hat” (162), Kubo is driven to tears when he is unable to proffer the man any words of encouragement. In the third-class waiting room of Kyŏngsŏng Station, the shabbiness and deformity of the waiting passengers, whose “distrustful eyes look weary and pathetic” (163), leave Kubo “once again gloomy” (164). And in Kubo’s obsessive concern with all the “child[ren] of sin” (171), born to women who have been deserted by their husbands and
lovers, Kubo highlights the tears in the social fabric rent by “modern” men. Feeling “truly sorry” for having “forgotten” the fatherless nephews of a friend, “Uncle Eye” (181)—as the children call Kubo because of his glasses—buys them two watermelons, a small act of kindness that makes him think: “Maybe, now, he’ll be cheerful” (182). This particular reprieve from gloominess and self-pity is fleeting, but its fugitive character emphasizes the rapidity with which Kubo internalizes an ongoing procession of social contradictions—and the ways in which they determine the qualitative dimension of his vision.

Ch’onggye Stream’s more objective and unhurried investigations of lower-class life, likewise, reveals the omnipresent social and economic inequalities borne by this class, but it also shows ways in which such individuals are integrated into the community. In the midst of winter, while Mr. Min is getting a haircut, the local beggars come into the barbershop for hot water to make their rice. “You, rascal,” says Mr. Min,

“It’s not the last day of the month yet. Why are you here begging for pennies?”
The beggar, however, was not there to beg. Without a word, the young barber, Kim, poured boiling water into the tin can that the beggar was pushing toward him.
Mr. Min was intrigued. “Ah, these beggars! I see they need hot water for their rice. Do they come here for the hot water often?”
“Yes. In the winter they do.” (279)

The small act of charity on the part of the barbershop owner seems, for Pak, to be one of the affirmative, if modest, counterbalances to the viciousness that often characterizes the struggle for life in the city. A larger instance of selfless compassion occurs with the so-called “vacillating virgin,” Kumsun, an unlucky and illiterate country girl lured to Seoul by an unscrupulous “libertine.” To spare her the indignities this “gold mine broker” (171) has planned for her, the

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20 One example of this occurs in the evening at Gwanghwamun, when Kubo is surprised by the nephews of a friend who call him “Uncle Eye”: “Poor children. They have hardly known a father’s love. Their father started another family in the countryside five years ago, and so they have been brought up almost exclusively by their mother. The mother was not to blame. The father, then. The father, too, was, generally speaking, a good man. Yet he certainly had a streak of libertinism when it came to women” (181).
21 Chapter 16 of Ch’onggye Stream is entitled “The Vacillating Virgin.” As we shall see, Kumsun endured at miserable existence at the home of her in-laws, especially after the death of her young husband.
22 This man, calling himself a “gold mine broker” (171), apparently has designs to sell Kumsun. However, he is arrested for gambling on their first night in the city, and spends almost a month in jail. The short chapter dealing with the period after his release is entitled “A Luckless Libertine.”
bargirls Kimiko and Hanako make a living arrangement with her: Kumsun will take care of the cooking, cleaning, and mending in exchange for rent. Protecting her from men who have less-than-honorable intentions towards her—including the owner of the boardinghouse where she stays her first nights in Seoul—Kimiko and Hanako offer her not only food and shelter, but also friendship and kindness, something which has been sorely lacking in her life:

Her path had been lonely, and she would have continued to amble along it with her head bowed down to the end of life. But now, she no longer needed to suffer life’s misfortune alone, because she was gaining friends, who would share with her everything, and trust and support one another with warm feelings and deep regard. So the joy of living would surge in their hearts like a gushing spring. (149)

Such acts of kindness seem to be the exception rather than the rule in Pak’s Seoul, but when they do occur, we see just how powerful their capacity is to soothe the pains and wounds of life.

Near the end of his revels, Kubo evinces a new capacity for empathy when he imaginatively sets himself in the place of a group of bargirls, and meaningfully reflects on the ways in which social and economic forces determine and shape an individual’s life. While the girls “pretend to be capable of understanding” the literary banter of Kubo and his poet-friend (Yi Sang), it is clear that they “cannot comprehend” (191). For one of the few times in the novella, though, Kubo does not regard their lack of knowledge as something to be scorned: “Isn’t ignorance, perhaps, a necessity for these girls? [. . .] The blissful, ephemeral delights that they enjoy, no matter how worthless they may appear, are made possible only by ignorance . . . as truths are” (191). The tone may still be somewhat condescending, but Kubo’s understanding that perception is relative, and that the causes of happiness are subjective, does signal a kinder, more forgiving engagement with the “precarious” (173) of his city. The subsequent melancholia he experiences, accentuated by the rain, is created by an empathetic engagement with the women, each of which, he imagines, possesses only one dress: “each of them worries about her only dress, as well as about her shoes and socks getting wet in the rain” (191). And when a cry for “Miss Yuki” pierces this momentary epiphany, Kubo recalls a poor widow he encountered, sometime before, in front of a Kwanggyo café. Dressed in “snowy white mourning clothes” (191) the apparently illiterate woman asked Kubo to read the advertisement for barmaids in the window. Knowing that his words will only add to her suffering, Kubo responded sensitively and compassionately:
Kubo studies her anew, and felt a pang in his heart. She was destitute, that much was clear. But she apparently had been able to keep off the street, not needing to look for a job. Then an unforeseeable misfortune had struck, and she was left with no alternative but to take to the streets, her grief still raw. (192)

Speculating that this woman, due to her recent misfortune, had been compelled to search for work with grief gnawing at her joints, Kubo, the novelist, does provide her with a narrative; but now he succeeds in respecting and affirming her singularity without trying to subsume her to a prefabricated, totalizing one. Kubo felt sympathy and sorrow for her at the same time as he allowed her to maintain her own despair and dignity. In re-envisioning and reinventing this encounter, Kubo is able to see, as if for the first time, that everyone must struggle with unhappiness and disappointment. “Kubo turns to look at the barmaids. Who’s more unhappy, that widow or these girls? Whose suffering, whose misery in life is greater?” (192). Although he decides “not to dwell on such a thought” (192), Kubo has asked the question, and not placed himself as the central point of reference. Ultimately, this affirmative movement of empathetic imaginings—the apotheosis, it seems, of Pak’s humane vision—leads Kubo to a more profound appreciation of his infinitely-loving mother, to whom he shall now return:

At this late hour his mother would still be awake, waiting for him. The fact that he didn’t take an umbrella might have caused her added worry. Kubo thinks of her small, sad, lonely face. And he himself cannot help feeling sad and lonely. Kubo had forced his lonely mother almost entirely out of his thoughts. But his mother must have thought, worried, in anguish, about her son, all day long. Oh, a mother’s love, how infinitely deep and infinitely sad. From the parents to the husband, and then on to the son, shifts a woman’s love—yet, is it not the stage of motherhood that renders a woman’s love so powerful, so sacred?” (193).

In the face of the city’s impersonality and anonymity, and its ubiquitous suffering and misery, Kubo insists that love remains essential and redemptive. Pak, it seems, takes to heart Shelley’s words: “The great secret of morals is Love: or a going out of our own nature, and an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person, not our own” (700). For him, as for Joyce, it seems that love just might be “The word known to all men” (Ulysses 15.4192-93).

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23 It is unknown if Pak Tae-won ever read P.B. Shelley’s A Defence of Poetry; if nothing else, it does appear that the two shared a kindred sensibility.
Women of Seoul

“After his father passed away, Kubo lived with many females, including his mother, aunt, cousin, nanny, housekeeper, and maid. He was able to learn a great deal about them by listening to their conversations. He also liked to hang out with his friend, the poet Yi Sang, and have conversations at the coffeehouse or bar with waitresses, barmaids and kisaengs. He thought that it must be hard for these women to work in such a field, but he wished that they could all have the opportunity to live up to their full potential. From these experiences, Kubo found it easy to describe the lives of women and accurately and meaningfully portray them in his fiction.” (Daniel Pak)

Kubo’s transformation from solipsism and self-pity to a more expansive and empathetic relationship to Seoulites—and especially the women of Seoul—is, perhaps, the most remarkable and commendable aspect of Pak’s novella. For much of his day, though, Kubo assumes the right to speak for the women he gazes upon, determining, for them, who they are and what their “limited” dreams are: “They’re not aware of how unsteady their footsteps are in the world. Not a single one of them has a firm goal in life, but ignorance blinds them to their common instability” (173). The alternative to imposing such sweeping, stereotypical narratives upon them—in this case, the sex workers of Gwanghwamun—would be an attempt to imaginatively identify with their situation, as Kubo ultimately does at the end of the text. But this representation of Kubo’s short-sightedness seems entirely intentional: as with Joyce’s portrayal of Stephen Dedalus in A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, there is danger in neatly identifying Pak’s sensibility with that of his literary creation. Indeed, the ironic distance between the two points towards the need for greater empathy to cultivate a more fertile aesthetic, as well as a kinder city. And perhaps what is most profound about Pak’s high valuation of empathy is that Kubo’s passage from blindness to insight is simultaneously the story of his evolving capacity to appreciate the difficult plight faced by the women of a male-dominated Seoul.

Kubo’s myopia, and his tendency to imbibe and disseminate pre-fabricated stereotypes, is more than offset in Ch’onggye Stream, where Pak’s narrator provides the “precarious” with complex interiorities. Here, the bargirls, concubines, and kisaengs are shown to be all-too-aware of their tenuous foothold in life, prey to the fickleness of health, beauty, and age; and thus they take advantage of their youthful bodies before they are lost. This is apparent in the lucidity of Mr.
Min’s unfaithful concubine: “she was fully aware that being in love and having a guaranteed life were two entirely different matters. She never dreamt of giving up luxuries provided by Mr. Min to carry on her affair with her lover” (91). Largely scorned by “polite society”—and envied by the washerwomen like Chomgryong’s mother, who says, spying a rickshaw carrying a kisaeng: “You, slut, whatever they say, you have the best life” (9)—such women are by no means glamorized in the novel, but they are treated with understanding and fairness. Forced to fend for themselves in an unfair world, Mr. Min’s concubine, the barmaids Hanako and Kimiko, and the kisaeng Ch’wi Ok use their pragmatic intelligence to ensure some measure of economic stability in their lives. They, like most other Seoulites, do their best to survive with the talents and materials at their disposal. And, in the end, it is the vagaries of male desire, in a world constructed around the physical and egotistical desires of men, that make these women such an integral, if peripheral, part of the social fabric.

While marriage and motherhood, in both Kubo and Ch’onggye Stream, are presented as the socially-sanctioned ideal for women, the reality of married life for many women is one of unrelenting misery. There are a couple of reasonably happy marriages in Ch’onggye Stream, most notably that between the herbalist’s eldest son and his wife. But for those like Kumsun, Mandori’s mother, Ippuni, and finally Hanako, married life entails being neglected by their husbands, tormented and virtually imprisoned by vindictive mother-in-laws, and, in several cases, subjected to vicious beatings. Highlighting the fact that the woman and her children, for all intents and purposes, become the property of the husband once married (and the property of his family if he is deceased), Ch’onggye Stream, at least implicitly, offers many troubling critiques of this institution. Prior to her arrival in Seoul, Kumsun, who was “born into a destitute farm family” and who “lived since childhood without a ray of happiness” (106), was jilted by her first fiancé the night before their wedding, and subsequently married to a twelve-year-old groom, three years her junior. Sexually frustrated, and tormented by her “mean-spirited and almost pathologically jealous” (109) mother-in-law and her “lustful father-in-law” (111), Kumsun, after the death of her own mother and husband, flees to Seoul with the “gold mine broker” (105), seeing it as her only alternative to suicide. Mandori’s mother, another girl from the country, endures an utterly abusive marriage:
Born under an unlucky star, Mandori’s mother’s life had been cruel since the day of her birth. Poverty was beyond her control, but then she had married an abusive man, and had even become accustomed to the pain her husband daily inflicted on her. This man she had married to serve got himself another woman, and had become even more violent. (35)

For Mandori’s mother, it is only the thought of her children that prevents her from committing suicide. She, too, has fled to Seoul, finding employment as a servant in the herbalist’s home. Unfortunately, though, her husband unexpectedly follows her to the city; and after a short period of sobriety and apparent repentance, he again takes up drinking and womanizing, neglecting his duties at the herbalist’s house and inflicting severe beatings upon her. As we see in Mandori’s mother’s pleas to him during a particularly ghastly beating, “Kill me, please kill me, kill me” (38), Pak unflinchingly reveals just how hopeless and desperate a wife’s plight can be in this society. And the last time we see this unhappy wife,24 walking along the stream, “The gruesome fresh fingernail scratches on her face gave clear evidence of her latest troubles” (185).

The endemic powerlessness of women, sustained, in part, by Confucian dictates prescribing the subordination of wives to their husbands, is accentuated by a pervasive and systemic violence exerted through the vicious acts of many Korean men. In Ch’onggye Stream, such men, unable to resolve their various frustrations, violently displace their disappointment onto the women who wait at home for them. While Pak suggests, elliptically, that this violence may be traced back to the Japanese colonial presence and the limited range of economic and political opportunities available to most Korean men, its most visible cause stems from the failures of married men to secure the affections of another woman. For instance, the savage beating of Mandori’s mother, mentioned above, comes after her husband has been humiliated by the husband of his mistress. Mandori’s father, we learn from the washerwomen, stood by impotently as “The bitch’s husband . . . dashed to his wife, who was cackling with her new man, grabbed her hair, and hit and kicked her” (68). After attempting to drink away his shame, Mandori’s father returned home, brutally reopening his wife’s never-healing wounds: “She is covered with bruises all year round and the scratches never heal” (69). A similar fate awaits Ippuni, who is unhappily married to the unfaithful factory worker, Kang. One evening at the restaurant Kunhwa, Kang shamelessly attempts to flirt with the waitress Shizuko, whom another diner, Chomryong (the ice-cream and

24 Mandori’s mother’s family, by this point, has lost its position in the herbalist’s household.
cheesnut vendor), also fancies. Annoyed by the rudeness, and “outraged by Kang’s promiscuous behavior,” Chomryong “shower[s] him with punches and kicks at lightning speed” (294). In what might be considered a cathartic moment, and a figuration of Pak’s own resentment towards all the indignities the women of his city must endure, Chomryong not only battes Kang physically, he also demands repentance: “Damn it! Admit your sins! You didn’t know a woman is a human being too? It never crossed your mind that it’s a sin to go from one woman to another as you please. Damn you!” (294). While Chomryong strikes a blow for—and, in a sense, gives a voice to—all the women like Ippuni who must suffer their husbands’ infidelities in silence, the cost of this for her is extreme. Lying in bed for three days, Kang “had reflected on the situation for a long time while recovering, and his deliberation had resulted in the atrocious beating of his wife, from which it had taken her five days to regain her strength” (309). Soon after, Kang, fearing Chomryong’s parting words, “I will not let him live if I hear again he mistreats her,” dismisses “Ippuni, the legitimate wife for whom he no longer felt a shred of affection” (309). So while Ippuni must bear this final indignity from her humiliated husband, she is relieved to return to her mother and “resume[] her daily routines just as she had done before” (310). As for the washerwomen, they “unanimously agreed that Ippuni would be better off remaining home than continuing to suffer a bitter life with her husband’s family”—and they “felt quite happy now that they were no longer obliged to scream obscenities aimed at Ippuni’s in-laws in defense of the wretched mother and daughter” (310).

For a short while, the marriage of Hanako to the pharmacist’s son is filled with hope: “She had convinced herself at the beginning of her marriage that she could overcome any suffering, any sorrow, if only her husband would keep on loving her” (297). However, she soon finds herself bullied by her mother-in-law, rejected by the children from her husband’s first marriage, and neglected by her husband, who has lost his ardor for Hanako “in favor of another woman, just as he had abandoned his former wife for her” (297). And strongly dissuaded from seeing even her own mother, Hanako, renamed “Yong” by her husband, resigns herself to the situation, internalizing her misfortune and transforming it into guilt:

She asked herself, had she ever contemplated the consequences of her decision? Had she anticipated the pain that would be inflicted on the woman [the husband’s first wife] being
abandoned and on the children being robbed of their mother’s love, none of whose wounds would ever be healed? She deserved her suffering and the hatred that everyone in the family felt against her. They were entitled to treat her with malice to punish her for her sin for which she would seek no forgiveness. On a snowy night, she stayed awake, biting her lip until it bled, and wept without reservation. (302)

Pak’s finesse here lies in his revelation of the ways in which a woman, victimized by an unjust, patriarchal system, seeks to rationalize her suffering by positing herself as its cause. And this systemic unfairness, which diminishes and distorts Korean women from within and without, Pak suggests through Kimiko, is something to be despised:

“To the hell with the noble-born and those with high social distinction! Are they entitled to steal a daughter from her mother and ignore the obligation to pay their respects to their in-laws? [. . .] What crime has she committed against the family of her daughter’s husband?” Seized with renewed rage, she swore to help this woman, whose only crime was poverty. (272)

While Kimiko is unable to provide much help for her best friend, her impotent “wrath” (272) against this system makes it clear with whom Pak’s sympathies lie—and his conviction that, as far as women are concerned, things ought to be otherwise.

The Writer of Modern Life

“At that time, the lives of most writers and poets were not very decent because, most of the time, they didn’t get paid for their work—except, of course, for the very famous ones. It was impossible for Kubo to find another job, so he wrote and wrote, whenever he had a chance. To quote from my father’s Chae Ga (Indebted House): ‘It was almost hopeless for a writer to lead a decent life on earth by writing, but I had no other talents or means, other than my writing. However pitiful, embarrassing, or even pathetic it was in the eyes of my wife, I lived by my pen day and night.’” (Daniel Pak)

Kubo’s peripatetic quest for “happiness” comes to its apparently hopeful conclusion with the young novelist “hastening home” (194) with a new appreciation for his mother and her unconditional love, but also with an apparent rediscovery of his literary vocation:

Though the friend said, see you again tomorrow, Kubo hardly hears him. Now I’ll have a life. Have a life. A life for myself, and comfort and rest for my mother—. Good night, the friend says again. Kubo at last turns to him, and silently nods. See you again
tomorrow night. But, Kubo, after a slight hesitation, tomorrow, from tomorrow, I will stay at home, will write—.

“Write a good novel.”

Says the friend in good faith, and they part. I will write a truly good novel. Finding happiness in that thought, Kubo takes no offense when a patrolling policeman casts a disparaging look at him. (193)

Wanting, now, “to think more of his mother’s happiness than of his own” (194), Kubo the novelist seems better equipped with the empathy and (self-)awareness necessary to write a novel like Ch’onggye Stream—or a novella like Kubo. Furthermore, in the intrusion of the policeman into the frame, we see a collision of the aesthetic, emotional, and political spheres. Although Pak does not comment further on this emblematical figure of the colonial state, Kubo’s reaction to him suggests the author’s determination to make his art an affirmative counterbalance to coercion and domination, in whatever forms they may take.

So while Kubo seems to affirm something like Shelley’s “sacred spark” of poetry, and its ability to shape individuals into finer, kinder, and more imaginative human beings, the fact remains that the writer in 1930s Seoul faced many deeply embedded obstacles. Japanese censorship—and the ban on writing in Hangul the last years of the decade—was an important factor, but even more fundamental, if Kubo is an accurate guide, was the lack of esteem in which Korean writers were held. Kubo’s mother, for one, finds the proposition that her son could earn a living as a writer rather dubious:

The mother feels heavy-hearted and sorry for her son, who has no intention of looking for a regular job, always just reading and writing, and wandering aimlessly in the dead of the night. (147)

The mother thinks having a regular job is much better than writing, and concludes that her gifted son will do well in whatever he does. (149)

The mother’s suspicion about writing as a profession is echoed throughout Kubo. A security agent at Kyŏngsŏng Station, “watching him with suspicious eyes” (164), drives Kubo from the third-class waiting room just as he opens his notebook to record his impressions of the passengers there. At the coffeehouse, Kubo laments the fact that a man like his journalist friend must write, “With the same pen that is meant for poetry,” “run-of-the-mill articles on murderers,
robbers, and pyromaniacs” (169). This, Kubo surmises, “is, perhaps, a tragedy of their times” (169). Later, a drunken insurance agent patronizingly asks about “the remuneration rate for writing in Korea,” to which Kubo responds, somewhat facetiously, “that he knows nothing about it, since he never receives any” (185). But perhaps most poignant is the treatment of Kubo’s friend based on Yi Sang—a man who would die just a few years later, at the age of 27, after a long fight with tuberculosis. Struggling to publish his poetry, while keeping his teahouse afloat, this character is described as having “grown old” even though “He is still young age-wise” (187). When Kubo asks him if he has ever had “some small joy, a modest joy, such as receiving a surprise postcard from an unexpected friend . . . (186), the response succinctly articulates just how precarious the life of the artist is at this time, in this city:

The kind of letter which a good-for-nothing like you will never receive in your lifetime, and he sniggers. Yet his laughter rings hollow. Certified mail, most likely. In times like these, even running a small teahouse isn’t easy. Three months unpaid rent. The sky has become overcast, the shimmering stars disappearing from sight. The friend suddenly whistles. A poor novelist, and a poor poet. . . . Kubo’s thoughts drift towards his country, so poor, and his mind clouds over. (186)

Pak does not proffer great optimism that the writer’s plight in his country will improve any time soon, but he does affirm the dignity and seriousness of the artistic endeavor, especially “In times like these.” Indeed, what Kubo and Pak’s own struggles with poverty reveal is an irrepressible determination to continue writing, to, as Samuel Beckett wrote so many times, “go on.”

**Pak Tae-won’s Legacy**

“The literary legacy of my father is as vast as the 200 pieces that he wrote. His works, from both the South and the North, established him as a preeminent modernist novelist of Korean literature. The literary critic, Kim Jong Hoe, has perhaps said it best” (Daniel Pak):

“Kubo” Pak Tae-won is a central writer in the history of contemporary Korean literature, for both the South and the North. In the 1930s, he actively participated in the Kuinhoe (Group of Nine) movement, and achieved remarkable success in writing about the

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25 This is the friend based on Kim Gi-rim.
26 Pak actually wrote a story about Yi Sang’s struggles with the colonial administration to open a teahouse in the short story “Je Bi,” which was published in the Chosun Ilbo on November 23 and 24, 1939. 

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modern(ist) literary consciousness and contemporary life. After he defected to the North, he became the best writer of historical fiction in the North. He indeed holds a privileged place in the literary history of South and North Korea. (*Pak Tae-won’s Literature and Life*)

In 1950, Pak Tae-won visited Pyongyang under the auspices of the Southern Chosun Literary Alliance, with the intention of reporting on the literary scene in the North. The circumstances of his actual defection are murky; but, for Daniel and his family, all that really matters is that he never returned. During the North Korean Army’s occupation of Seoul, Daniel’s mother “was forced to work as a vice-president for their Democratic Women’s Association (*Yeo Mang*) for a short period of time,” an act of “collaboration” that eventually resulted in her being sentenced to life in prison. Released after five years, she suffered from a variety of debilitating physical ailments, including “severe nephritis, strokes, and palsy,” for the rest of her life. Soon after the war, Pak Tae-won’s books were banned in the South due to his defection, and “the whole family was deemed suspicious by the government because of the guilt-by-association system.” “Before the Korean War,” Daniel said, noticeably affected, “when the whole family lived together, my mother used to tell us that father was a famous novelist.” But after her release from prison, Daniel continued, “it was an unwritten law that we did not talk about my father at home.”

Because of his father’s notoriety in the South, Daniel was put under surveillance by the KIA, and brought in for interrogation on at least one occasion—despite his army service, which included a tour of duty in Vietnam in 1965. In 1971, he was able to graduate from Seoul National University with a degree in Agricultural Economics, which paved the way for a long career as a businessman. His passion, though, is for sharing the literary universe of “Kubo the Novelist” with all those who have been moved by his works. He continues “to collect data on my father’s work and manage his copyright,” and in 2009, on the centennial anniversary of his father’s birth, Daniel was named vice-president of “Kubo’s 100th Birthday Memorial Society.” Having collected 95% of the 300 texts his father wrote in both the South and the North, Daniel plans to dedicate the rest of his days to the memory of his father, the times he chronicled, and the characters he lovingly and empathically created: “I’m trying my best to share all of this information with those who love Kubo’s literature, as well as scholars researching his work. I would like to dedicate my utmost energy to this job until the last day of my life.”
WORKS CITED


