

Marching to a Different Beat: Existentialist Themes in Yi Munyŏl's Debut Novella, *Saeha'gok* (Song under a Border Fortress)*

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Yi Munyŏl is one of the most popular contemporary authors in Korea. His works, as well as being best sellers at home, have also been widely translated into Western languages. Nevertheless, his supposed alignment with conservative forces in Korea has earned him the disapprobation, if not the contempt, of the left, while his intrinsic value as a novelist remains under scrutiny in skeptical academic circles. There are, however, very few Western critical studies on Yi's work despite the fact that of all recent Korean novelists his early works at least appear to have been most influenced by Western literary and intellectual trends. This study, therefore, examines Yi's debut work *Saeha'gok* (Song under a border fortress, 1979), which deals with the lives of a group of professional and conscript soldiers in the South Korean army during the Park Chung Hee [Pak Chŏnghŭi] era. Although the setting is specific to Korea, the issues that Yi Munyŏl explores are universal. The burdens of an existential worldview are clearly to be seen in this work, as the novella's protagonist attempts to chart his way through the alienating absurdity of army life and by extension the absurdity of human existence itself. In an interview Yi has admitted a deep interest in existentialism during the early part of his writing career. This study, therefore, examines the extent to which an existentialist view of life underlies Yi's treatment of the problem of the human condition in this novella, which is set during the height of the Cold War on the Korean peninsula.

Keywords: Yi Munyŏl, Korean fiction, existentialism, nihilism, militarization

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Song Under a Border Fortress (塞下曲: Saixiaqu)

I let my horse drink as we cross the autumn stream.
 The water's cold, and the wind like a sword.
 The sun has not yet set on the level sands,
 And shrouded in darkness Lingtao may still be seen.
 Ancient battles waged along those long walls
 Were all famed for their glory once.
 But now the past is covered by a yellow dust,
 And white bones are tangled with wild flowers.

Wang Changling (698-765)¹

Introduction

1. Biographical Background

Yi Munyöl was born in Seoul on 18 May 1948, the year of the division of the Korean Peninsula into the Republic of Korea to the south of the 38th Parallel and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea to its north. Just over two years after his birth, on 25 June 1950, the Korean War broke out, during which Yi Munyöl's father defected to the communist-led north for ideological reasons.² Concerning the absence of his father from such an early age, Yi stated in an interview in 2003: "After my father went over to North Korea in my childhood, I always felt overwhelmed by a feeling of deprivation and the sense that something had been taken away from me."³

Yi appears to have subsequently led an uprooted childhood with frequent

1. The English translation of this poem is by the author of this article. For the original Chinese text together with Korean translation, annotation, and commentary, see *Hanyök Tang si sambaek su* (*Tang shi sanbai shou*) [Three hundred Tang poems in Korean translation], edited by Qiu Xieyou and translated by An Pyöngnyöl (Taegu: Kyemyöng taehakkyo ch'ulp'anbu, 1991), 116-117.

2. Kim Yunsik et al. "Chakka yönbo" [Author's career] in *Yi Munyöl ron* [Essays on Yi Munyöl] (Seoul: Saminhaeng, 1991), 343-346.

3. "An Interview with Yi Munyöl," *Acta Koreana* 6, no. 1 (2003), 117. In relation to Yi's sense of loss, it is interesting to note that concerning post-World War II Korean fiction, Cho Nam-hyun states: "there are also scholars who define the history of the fiction of the period as a prolonged search for the absent father. The Korean father, absent on account of voluntary political activism or of forced abduction, stands for the basic strength or value or ideology that support and maintain (*sic*) a society and era. Hence, his absence means the absence of supporting principles." Cho Nam-hyun, "Trends in Korean Fiction Since WWII" in Cho Nam-hyun and Oh Sae-young, *Understanding Modern Korean Literature* (Seoul: The Korean Culture and Arts Foundation, 1991), 33.

changes of school, as well as a three-year period of no schooling at all from 1962 to 1964, during which he worked as a manual laborer for his brother. In 1964 he reentered high school but dropped out again one year later. After suffering from typhoid fever for six months in 1967, he began studying once more to enter university and in 1968 matriculated in the College of Education of Seoul National University, where he majored in Korean language education. These early experiences were later to form the background for one of his best-known works in Korea, the autobiographical Bildungsroman, *Chŏlmŭn nal ŭi ch'osang* (Portrait of youthful days, 1981). In 1970, however, he left university without graduating and in 1973 married and entered the army where he did his three-year national service in the signal corps. After leaving the army in 1976, he first worked as a teacher in a private educational institute in Taegu and then in 1978 joined the editorial staff of the *Maeil sinmun* (Daily news) in the same city. He made his literary debut in 1979 with the novella *Saeha'gok* (Song under a border fortress), which appears to have been partially based on Yi's own experiences in the South Korean army and was published serially by the national daily newspaper, the *Tonga ilbo*.

Since that time Yi Munyŏl has published profusely and garnered many literary prizes including the Onŭl ŭi Chakkasang (Contemporary writer's prize) for his novel *Saram ŭi adŭl* (Son of man) in 1979, the Taehanmin'guk Munhaksang (Republic of Korea literature prize) for *Hwangje rŭl wihayŏ* (In the name of the emperor) in 1982, the Yi Sang Munhaksang (Yi Sang prize for literature) for *Uri tŭl ŭi ilgŭrŏjin yŏngung* (Our twisted hero) in 1987, the Hyŏndae Munhaksang (Modern literature prize) for *Siin kwa toduk* (The poet and thief) and *Siin* (The poet), the Taehanmin'guk Munhwa Yesulsang—munhak pumun (Republic of Korea culture and arts prize—literature section) in 1992, and in 1999 the Hoamsang (Ho-Am Prize in the Arts) for *Pyŏn'gyŏng* (Change).⁴ From 1994 to 1997 Yi taught in the Department of Korean Language and Literature at Sejong University in Seoul and in 1998 founded and became the head of Puak Munwŏn (Buak Literary Center).

Yi has, therefore, undoubtedly been one of the most prolific and successful of contemporary Korean novelists but has nevertheless come under attack for his perceived political conservatism, which has been most clearly expressed by his participation in the South Korean conservative party, Han Nara Tang (Grand National Party).⁵ Furthermore, despite the general popularity of his

4. Im Tonghŏn, "'Kajang chohanhanŭn chakka' Yi Munyŏl ssi 1 wi" ['Favorite authors,' Yi Munyŏl ranked in the first place], *Segye ilbo*, 27 September, 1992, p. 16.

5. Concerning his political beliefs, Yi Munyŏl has stated, "Nowadays either from my own

works in Korea and the fact that they have been translated into numerous foreign languages, Yi is also still regarded with a certain degree of skepticism in Korean academic circles.⁶

2. *Literary Background*

In the introduction of his pioneering translations of modern Korean fiction, *Ten Korean Short Stories*, first published in 1981, Kevin O'Rourke emphasizes the pessimism of the Korean short story genre in particular and of modern Korean literature in general:

.... the national attitude of the typical Korean intellectual has been pessimistic, defeatist and negative, a trait which remains as true in the short story today as it was in the developing years in the 1920s. In fact, this emphasis on the negative rather than the positive, on disillusion rather than hope is the overriding mark of all modern Korean literature.⁷

This pessimism is undoubtedly also a major feature of Yi Munyŏl's work, especially his early writing. Intellectual pessimism, however, is not unique to modern Korean literature, but rather may be seen in part at least as being a concomitant of Korea's opening to the West in the nineteenth century when Korea accepted not only an inflow of Western technology and the protestant Christian religion but also the increasingly humanistic materialism of the Western intellectual tradition.

While Korea, therefore, had its own unique circumstances and conditions shaping its cultural development in the twentieth century, especially its experiences of occupation by Japan from 1910 to 1945, the subsequent division

intention or because of the intention of others, I have come to be viewed as standing on the side of the 'Conservative Right.' I am cast in this role because I do not agree with a lot of what the Left are involved in nowadays, but that does not mean that I completely support the Right either." "An Interview with Yi Munyŏl," 121.

6. "An Interview with Kevin O'Rourke," *Acta Koreana* 7, no. 1 (2004), 185. In this interview O'Rourke mildly questions the skeptical stance of Korean academics toward Yi Munyŏl and suggests that since the death of the poet Sŏ Chŏngju in 2000, he has been one of the Republic of Korea's most likely candidates for the Nobel Prize for literature along with the poet Ko Ŭn.

7. Kevin O'Rourke, "Introduction" in *Ten Korean Short Stories*, ed. and trans. by O'Rourke, (Seoul: Yonsei UP, 1981), 2-3. In their introduction to Yi Munyŏl's novel *The Poet [Sim]*, the translators Chong-Wha Chung and Brother Anthony of Taizé describe Korean literature as being "full of tears of sorrow, while it almost always falls short of tragedy in the proper sense of the word." See Yi Mun-Yol, *The Poet*, translated by Chong-Wha Chung and Brother Anthony of Taizé (London: The Harvill Press, 1995), xi.

of the peninsula into two separate states in the wake of liberation in 1945, the devastation of the Korean War (1950-1953), followed by totalitarian rule in the North that has lasted until the present day, and a succession of military dictatorships in the South that only came to an end in the 1990s, modern Korean literature should not be studied without reference to the external influences of world literature. As the Czech-American comparative literary critic René Wellek states:

... it is important to think of literature as a totality and to trace the growth and development of literature without regard to linguistic distinctions. The great argument for 'comparative' or 'general' literature or just 'literature' is the obvious falsity of the idea of a self-enclosed national literature.⁸

In Europe and the United States, the late nineteenth century was an age that witnessed the decline of the Christian faith as a result of increasing skepticism in the field of philosophy and the rise of materialism due in part to the new emphasis on empirical science. In the same century Darwin's theory of evolution overturned the traditional Christian understanding of the creation, Freud provided a plausible theory of human psychology based on physical desire, Nietzsche proclaimed the death of God and condemned Christianity as a "slave religion," while Karl Marx put forward a materialist interpretation of history and a materialist blueprint for the salvation of mankind.

Literature is in some sense a barometer of the prevailing intellectual climate and late Victorian British literature reveals the prevalence of a skeptical and pessimistic *zeitgeist*. Matthew Arnold's poem *Dover Beach*, which laments the passing of the age of faith and concludes that the world "hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light. / Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain . . .,"⁹ is only one of many examples that may be drawn from the field of late nineteenth-century European literature that clearly indicate the Western spiritual crisis of faith, which occurred in tandem with its industrialization, urbanization and technological progress.

The development of modern Korean literature in the twentieth century inevitably came under the influence of its Western counterpart as In-sŏb Zŏng (Chŏng Insŏp) points out:

8. Rene Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature*, 3rd ed. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966), 49.

9. Matthew Arnold, *The Poetical Works of Matthew Arnold* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1891), 227.

... Korean writers [in the 1920s] were already much influenced by those of Europe and America, both by direct contact with the Western literary works, or through Japanese translations or Chinese publications. As a result, all sorts of literary philosophies and “—isms” were introduced into Korean literary works.¹⁰

Two of the Western sources of the apparent nihilism that can be perceived in Yi's early works appear to be the philosophies of the French and German existentialists Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus and Martin Heidegger. Indeed, the contemporary Korean critic Kim Uktong goes as far as to state that existentialism based on the philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre together with romantic humanism form the basic worldview that informs all of Yi Munyöl's work.¹¹

The transformation of the traditional Western value system in the twentieth century and the consequent cultural confusion that it produced have also had an effect on the development of Korean culture, which has attempted to accommodate not only Christianity but also Western humanism within its own traditional frameworks of human spirituality and morality rooted in its indigenous Shamanism, Mahayana Buddhism and Neo-Confucianism. Yi Munyöl's works, despite their ambiguous and ironic tone, are nevertheless oriented toward social and moral criticism. This criticism does not necessarily take the traditional Chinese and Korean literary form of “virtue rewarded and evil punished,” but nevertheless reveals an implicit value system despite the professed nihilistic stance of many of Yi's protagonists.¹² Rejecting even the possibility of the existence of any form of supreme being and taking despair and pessimism as his starting point, Yi Munyöl has sought through his works to build up a value system based on the truth and beauty to be found in nature

10. In-söb Zong (Chöng Insöp), *A Guide to Korean Literature: Paying Special Attention to the Influence of Western Literature on the Development of Modern Korean Culture* (Seoul: Hollym, 1982), 191. Zong's view is also corroborated by Cho Dong-il, who writes, “The main basis for the division of modern literature from classical literature [in the field of Korean literary studies] was that the former had been much influenced by Western literature.” See Cho Dong-il, *Korean Literature in Cultural Context and Comparative Perspective* (Seoul: Jipmoondang, 1997), 129.

11. Kim Uktong, *Yi Munyöl: Silchonjuujök hyumönijün ü munhak* [Yi Munyöl: The literature of existential humanism] (Seoul: Minumsa, 1994), 30.

12. Concerning the traditional approach of “virtue rewarded and evil punished,” Yi has stated, “Many writers believe that the novel structure that presents ‘virtue rewarded and evil punished’ (*kwönsön ching’ak*), in which the good are successful and the evil perish, is outmoded and unfashionable. But I wanted to stress in my novel [*Uri tül ü ilgüröjin yöngung* (Our twisted hero)] that the theme of ‘virtue rewarded and evil punished’ was not out of date at all, and I wanted to show that despite the many faults of our society, the fact that the villain ultimately failed in that society should give us hope.” “An Interview with Yi Munyöl,” 121.

together with the intrinsic value of human freedom, and in this respect he has an affinity not only with existentialism but also with the traditions of both philosophical Daoism and Zen Buddhism in the East and Romanticism in the West.¹³ This article will closely examine Yi's debut work *Saeha'gok* and delineate some of the major strands of thought that have provided the philosophical foundations for much of Yi's literary output.

Saeha'gok (Song Under a Border Fortress)

The title of Yi Munyŏl's debut work, *Saeha'gok* (Song under a border fortress),¹⁴ appears to have been taken from the title of two poems by the Tang dynasty poet Wang Changling (698-765), one of which appears in English translation at the beginning of this article. Both these poems lament the futility of war, and by referring to them, Yi sets the tone for his own view of the militarized situation on the Korean Peninsula in the 1960s and 1970s during the Park Chung Hee [Pak Chŏnghŭi] era of military dictatorship in the south and an even more militarized communist regime in the north under Kim Il Sung [Kim Ilsŏng].

The novella begins in a South Korean army camp apparently at the very moment of the outbreak of war. The narrative is in the third person but is mediated through the eyes of a young first lieutenant in the signal corps, Yi Sangbŏm. In the midst of the chaos of men being mobilized for action, Yi laconically remarks, "So this is the way wars break out."¹⁵ It is only when we reach the eighth page of the novella, however, that we are informed that it is not an actual war that has broken out but only a military exercise being conducted along the tense border with North Korea.

13. In his novel *Chŏlmŭn nal ŭi ch'osang* Yi Munyŏl appears to paraphrase the concluding lines of the English Romantic poet John Keats' "Ode to a Grecian Urn," which ends "Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know," when the narrator hails beauty as the touchstone of all values and the foundation of truth, "Beauty is the beginning of all value and the end. It is the aggregation of all concepts and at the same time absolute emptiness. Things can be beautiful because they are true and true because they are beautiful." Yi Munyŏl, *Chŏlmŭn nal ŭi ch'osang*, 190. For a discussion of the function of romanticism in Yi Munyŏl's works, see An Nam-yun [An Namyŏn], "Yi Munyŏl sosŏl ŭi isangjuŭijŏk kyŏnggyang kwa hyŏnsil insik ŭi kwan'gye [The Use of Romanticism in the Pursuit of Reality in the Work of Yi Munyŏl (An Nam-yun's translation)], *Hyŏndaesosŏl yŏn'gu* 12 (2000): 297-316.

14. All translations of passages from *Saeha'gok* and other works in Korean in this text are by the author of this article.

15. Yi Munyŏl, *Saeha'gok*, in *K'allep'at'a k'alla* (Seoul: Nanam, 1990), 59.

The abrupt beginning to the work emphasizes one of the key themes of the novella: namely, that people are unable to control their own destiny in life but are simply victims or victimizers. This theme is typical of existentialist concerns over human freedom, and the chaotic state of affairs as the soldiers scramble into action serves as a vivid illustration of Martin Heidegger's concept of *Geworfenheit* ("thrownness"), namely, the state of human beings having been flung into the world regardless of their own independent volition—a state which creates a sense of anxiety (*Angst*) in the face of an inevitable end of physical existence in death.¹⁶

This work may in fact be read as an extended existential allegory in which the four days of military maneuvers around which the action takes place become a metaphor for the condition of human life itself. One of Yi Munyöl's skills as a novelist is his ability to introduce philosophical questioning within this basic framework of realistic story telling.¹⁷ By means of a rapid juxtaposition of incidents that match the urgency and confusion of the outbreak of war, the author reveals the character of the protagonist Lieutenant Yi and the microcosmic world of his signals unit. On finding one of his subordinates, Private Kim, apparently sleeping at his post, Yi curses him and kicks him only to realize that he is not sleeping but crying. The pang of regret that Yi feels for his harsh treatment of the man reveals his essentially compassionate nature, a characteristic that he shares with many of the protagonists of Yi Munyöl's works. Being young and coming from the Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) rather than the regular army, Lieutenant Yi is presented as someone who has not been so corrupted by military life; nevertheless, he also is inescapably caught up in the dehumanizing structure of the army. This army, of course, on one level acts as a specific metaphor for the militarized society of South Korea in the 1960s under the Park Chung Hee regime, but Yi Munyöl in criticizing the specific historical reality of Korea is also making a more universal statement about life itself.

16. Concerning the relationship between nullity (*Nichtigkeit*), "thrownness," and death, Heidegger wrote, "The 'nothing' with which anxiety brings us face to face, unveils the nullity by which Dasein, in its very basis, is defined; and this basis itself is as thrownness into death." Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 356.

17. Concerning the existentialist philosophical underpinnings of his early work, Yi Munyöl has stated, "In my teens I liked sentimentalist writers like Hermann Hesse and Andre Gide. In my late teens and my mid-twenties I was absorbed in existentialist philosophy and became captivated by writers such as Dostoyevsky and Thomas Mann. In the 1960s I embarked on my literary career, and around that time I was passionately researching the existentialist philosophy of Sartre and Nietzsche." "An Interview with Yi Munyöl," 120.

The author's narrative method involves frequent changes of pace as in the midst of giving an account of the army in action, he digresses to provide the reader with insights into the backgrounds and personalities of the leading characters. The narrative, therefore, exists on two levels. There is the chronological unfolding account of the incidents of the military exercise on the first level and the digressive accounts of the major and minor characters' histories on the second level. These second-level accounts are non-chronological and occur through the reflections of Lieutenant Yi. The somewhat detached consciousness of Lieutenant Yi, which is essentially contemplative or observational, thus provides the hub that holds the disparate lives of the characters in a temporary, unified whole. It should also be noted that the author himself did his military service in a signals unit in the South Korean army, and there is, therefore, a strong autobiographical element to this work, which can also be found most notably in *Chölmün nal üi ch'osang* (A portrait of youth). In this respect Yi Munyöl's approach to novel writing seems to conform to the theory of memory as a creative force that was put forward by the Marxist literary critic Georg Lukacs (1885-1971), who was best known for his criticism of modernist forms and defense of realism in literature. In his seminal work, *Theory of the Novel*, Lukacs claims, "Only in the novel and in certain epic forms resembling the novel does memory occur as a creative force affecting the object and transforming it."¹⁸

The first character of significance to be introduced after Lieutenant Yi is Sergeant Kang. Although Kang is Yi's inferior in the army hierarchy, the latter cannot help feeling that in reality Kang, who is older and more experienced, is his superior:

Therefore, even though in the signals division there were three noncommissioned squad leaders and five veterans, as well as First Lieutenant Yi and Master Sergeant Im, in reality, almost all matters were carried out centering on him [Kang]. And there were times when Lieutenant Yi even had the thought that he was the spiritual head of the signals division.¹⁹

The portrait of the pragmatic Sergeant Kang is developed at length in the course of the novella and stands in juxtaposition to the more idealistic Lieutenant Yi. Although Kang has some affinity with another of Yi Munyöl's strong characters, Öm Söktae in *Uri tül üi ilgürojin yöngung* (Our twisted hero),

18. Georg Lukacs, *The Theory of the Novel*, trans. Anna Bostok (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971), 127.

19. Yi Munyöl, *Saeha'gok*, 65.

he does not misuse his charisma and personal power to the same extent. Nevertheless, Kang is presented as a realist and a survivor, who dominates those around him with the force of his personality but, at the same time, has somehow compromised his higher ideals—ideals which Lieutenant Yi strives to uphold in the face of the absurdities and degradations of army life.²⁰

Sergeant Mun, however, the next character to be introduced in the narrative, is somebody whom the vicissitudes of life are defeating both physically and spiritually:

Even though his face, sagging and ageing from alcohol and women, made him look as though he had passed his mid-forties, he was in fact only thirty-four. As the son of a rural pastor he had had a fortunate upbringing and had been relatively well-educated. But after leaving home to attend high school in Kwangju, he had fallen for a bar girl . . .²¹

Mun had subsequently dropped out of high school and then as life grew more difficult for the young couple, they had begun to quarrel, and eventually the woman had left him. Mun after searching for her in vain finally entered a college for noncommissioned officers. Nevertheless, he cannot escape from his obsession for the woman, despite several subsequent failed relationships. We are also told that his habit of heavy drinking has rendered him “an eternal sergeant first class.”²²

The irony of the fact that the most demoralized character in the novel comes from a Christian background suggests the author’s own rejection of established religion as a means of overcoming the apparent absurdity of life.²³ Mun’s character, therefore, has much in common with many other characters that populate modern Korean fiction of whom O’Rourke writes:

Always, the characters are walking a path that leads to destruction. It may be sex,

20. In a 2004 interview Yi Munyŏl suggested that Sergeant Kang, not only a survivor but also a natural leader, was the type of person needed in the confusing political scene in South Korea. See “Yi Munyŏl yŏngha int’obyu: Kang pyŏngjang kukhoe ro ponaeja (Let’s send Sergeant Kang to the National Assembly),” <http://zine.news.empas.com/print.tsp/20040125n00019/> (accessed 25 March, 2004).

21. Yi Munyŏl, *Saeha’gok*, 67.

22. Yi Munyŏl, *Ibid.*, 67.

23. Concerning his personal views on religion, Yi Munyŏl has stated, “I don’t have a religion. I’m an atheist.” Nevertheless, he goes on to qualify this statement by saying, “Strictly speaking you could say that I am a Confucian. But the Confucian custom of sacrificing to one’s ancestors is not a religious ritual but is done out of respect for one’s ancestors. Bearing this in mind it is difficult to call Confucianism a religion.” See “An Interview with Yi Munyŏl,” 116.

or liquor, or social environment, or some compelling force like human weakness or jealousy, but always the conclusion is the same—inevitable destruction. As has been stressed repeatedly before, this is not a question of naturalist literary theory, nor the philosophy of determinism; it is in part the product of a desperate political reality, in part the product of the traditional concept of “unmyong” or fate.²⁴

The next character to appear on the stage of Lieutenant Yi’s reflective consciousness is Private Kim, the soldier Yi had kicked for sleeping at his post only to discover that he had in fact been crying. Kim is a pathetic figure whose wife has deserted his home and left his parents with their baby son. As a result of his suffering, Kim has begun to have aural hallucinations on the field telephone, receiving messages from soldiers from different nations on past battlefields in Korea’s war-torn history from the Japanese invasion of Chosŏn at the end of the sixteenth century to the Korean War in the early 1950s. Yi believes Kim’s psychosis has been triggered by his inadvertent discovery of buried skeletons while digging a foxhole—an incident that recalls the “white bones” of the long dead soldiers in Wang Changli’s poem from which Yi Munyŏl probably took the title for his novella. Each dead soldier that Kim believes he has been contacted by on the field telephone has a similar story of betrayal in love.

In this way Yi Munyŏl’s account includes not only the specific situation of post-liberation Korea, but also a universal view of the human condition, transcending the historical and geographical circumstances of the Korean Peninsula. Furthermore, the personal unhappiness of Sergeant Mun and Private Kim reveal the author’s consistently pessimistic view of love, marriage, and the family that is also present in later works such as *Kŭ hae kyŏul* (The winter of that year), *Kŭmsijo* (Garuda), and *Si’in* (The poet). For Yi, therefore, as with many other contemporary writers both inside and outside Korea, isolation and loneliness are seen as being fundamental to the human condition. The British critic David Daiches’ analysis of the concerns of twentieth-century British novelists, therefore, also seems to be appropriate to this work:

Loneliness is the great reality, love the great necessity: how can the two be brought together? The more public and social the world, the less real it is likely to be, so neither the earlier public view of significance nor the earlier confidence in the role of society can be maintained. Much modern fiction is the charting of a way out of solipsism.²⁵

24. Kevin O’Rourke, “The Korean Short Story of the 1920’s and Naturalism,” *International Journal of Korean Studies* 1 (1973), 44.

25. David Daiches, *The Novel and the Modern World*, Revised ed. (Chicago: University of

In light of subsequent events in the story, including the suicide of Private Kim, Lieutenant Yi's attempt to cheer up his subordinate is heavily ironic: "But you're going to come back alive. It's only a training exercise after all, and it has nothing to do with death or anything like that."²⁶

As in the novella, *Kū hae kyōul*, a wintry, mountainous landscape provides the backdrop for Yi Munyōl's bitter portrayal of men struggling to maintain their integrity in the face of the apparent tragedy and absurdity of the human condition. In *Saeha'gok* war itself becomes a metaphor for life, and the fact that the war in this case is only a 'war game' simply adds to the sense of futility and meaninglessness felt by those participating in it. By introducing the coded language of the signals unit and numerous military acronyms printed in the Roman alphabet in the *han'gŭl* text of the novella, such as ROTC (Reserve Officer Training Corps), DMZ (Demilitarized Zone), OP (Observation Post), CP (Command Post), RC (Range Control), ATT (Army Training Test), as well as other hybrid terms that combine the Roman alphabet with the Korean *han'gŭl* script, *D-taei* (D-day), *D+3il* (D+3 day), *M-16tan'gōm* (M-16 rifle bayonet), and English terms written in *han'gŭl*, *alp'a* (Alpha), *pŭrabo* (Bravo), *ch'ari* (Charlie), Yi Munyōl provides authenticity to his account of life in the South Korean army. This type of authenticity reflects the author's stated approach to his craft of never starting to write about something until he knows everything about it.²⁷ At the same time this jargon also creates an even deeper sense of alienation—not only is it the jargon of the military, it is also jargon that has been adopted perforce from the Republic of Korea's main ally, the United States, and may be interpreted in the context of this narrative as symbolizing the erosion of Korea's own cultural identity in the context of a world still dominated at that time by the ideological divisions of the Cold War.²⁸

Like a refrain or *leitmotiv*, Lieutenant Yi's terse comments on the nature of war, which punctuate the story at regular intervals, are to be understood as comments not simply on war but on the nature of life itself:

Chicago Press, 1960), 10.

26. Yi Munyōl, *Saeha'gok*, 70.

27. Yi Munyōl, *Ilgi ch'o*, 112, quoted in Kim Uktong, *Yi Munyōl: Silchonjuūjōk byumōnijūm ū munhak* [Yi Munyōl: The literature of existential humanism] (Seoul: Minūmsa, 1994), 28.

28. For an extensive study of Yi Munyōl's works, although not *Saeha'gok* itself, from a post-colonial theoretical perspective, see Kwōn Yuriya, *Yi Munyōl sosōl kwa ideōllogi* (Seoul: Kukhak charyowōn, 2009).

War is truly a desolate thing . . .
 War is a really exhausting thing . . .
 War is always fiercest at the end . . .²⁹

The character of Corporal Pak is introduced at the end of the first day of maneuvers. Pak is an older conscript on account of the fact that he joined the army late, having already attended “the graduate school of the best university in the country” and studied for the prestigious higher civil service examination. He is also married with a three-year-old son. Sergeant Kang, despite the fact that he is Pak’s superior in the military hierarchy, treats him with respect and affection as if he were his elder brother, addressing him with the honorific but intimate appellation “*hyöng*.” In a broader sense Pak may be seen as representing the Korean intellectual, who was powerless in a society dominated by the military elite during the Park Chung Hee era.

The introduction of Pak provides the opportunity for a three-way discussion in which Lieutenant Yi criticizes both Kang and Pak for their apparently anomic and hedonistic approach to life and blames them for seeming to be only interested in food, alcohol, and women. But when Yi accuses them of lacking diligence and courage, Kang retorts that it is usually one of those characteristics that causes gunshot accidents.³⁰

Yi wonders if their attitude has something to do with the former situation in Korea during the Japanese colonial period when Koreans were forced to fight and die for a country that was not their own. When he continues by arguing that that situation was too long ago to still be affecting people, however, Kang retorts that the vestiges of Japanese imperialism have not entirely disappeared.³¹

Kang finally explains that the cause of their materialistic pragmatism is their feeling of despair as soldiers:

“It is nihilism. It is a soldier’s despair.”
 “A soldier’s despair?”
 “The despair of someone who has handed over everything to someone else. Even the very existence which endows our life does not belong to the soldier himself. What he has is absolutely nothing.”³²

29. Yi Munyöl, *Saeha’gok*, 70, 71, and 90.

30. Yi Munyöl, *Ibid.*, 75.

31. Yi Munyöl, *Ibid.*

32. Yi Munyöl, *Ibid.*

As Kang finishes, Pak goes on to criticize “the motiveless sadism of the noncoms and the elitism of the officers.”³³ Pak recounts the humiliation he received at their hands on account of his superior educational background. The episode finally closes with Pak singing drunkenly a parody of Psalm 137: “Singing nihil, nihil, nihilia . . . By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion.”³⁴ As a subsequent verse of this well-known psalm, which expresses the sorrow and resentment of the Jewish people in exile in Babylon, asks the question, “How can we sing the songs of the LORD while in a foreign land?”³⁵ Yi Munyöl seems to be suggesting through Pak’s drunken outburst that the soldiers in the ROK army are living in a form of captivity and exile albeit within their own nation. Furthermore, if Yi’s portrayal of the army maneuvers is indeed a metaphor for life itself, as has been argued above, then human life in its present form is also a type of exile and captivity that alienates human beings from their true nature. Such alienation causes not only the despair and nihilism manifested by Pak but also the violent anger that is expressed in the rather shocking final verse of the same psalm, “O Daughter of Babylon, doomed to destruction, happy is he who repays you for what you have done to us—he who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks.”³⁶ For this reason real violence is never far from the surface and indeed breaks out repeatedly throughout the course of the “virtual” violence of the military exercises.

The struggle with nihilism and despair in *Saeha’gok* is a familiar theme in the work of Yi Munyöl and seems to derive from the preoccupations of existentialist philosophers and their forerunners from Nietzsche and Heidegger to Sartre and Camus. Its foundation lies in an atheistic or agnostic view of life that became a powerful intellectual force during the twentieth century, although its origins can be traced back to ancient times. As if to underline the prevailing atmosphere of pessimism in the novella, on the morning following Lieutenant Yi’s discussion with Pak and Kang concerning the “despair of the soldier,” the military police visit the army base to search for the murderer of a prostitute who had been strangled by a soldier in a nearby village. Needless to say, among the thousands of soldiers taking part in the exercise, it is impossible for them to trace the culprit.

33. Yi Munyöl, *Saeha’gok*, 77.

34. Yi Munyöl, *Ibid.*, 78. Psalm 137:1. Pak, of course, sings this psalm in Korean. The original English version given here is taken from the New International Version of the Bible.

35. Psalm 137: 4.

36. Psalm 137: 8-9.

Yi's artillery battery then makes the worst mistake the artillery can make by firing on its own side. Although the artillery is not using live rounds, the war games' judges decide that this incident of "friendly fire" would have caused the deaths of 110 soldiers and the destruction of six vehicles. It is subsequently revealed that the mistake had been compounded by the fact that Corporal Pak, on his way to deliver the urgent message to cease fire, had been intercepted and violently assaulted by Second Lieutenant Sim for not wearing regulation dress. It then comes to light that Sim has a particular grudge against Pak because the latter is a graduate of the prestigious university that Sim twice failed to enter. In this instance the pettiness and inflexibility of army regulations and the personal jealousy of an officer toward his subordinate are shown as having potentially much wider fatal consequences.

When Yi later discovers Pak and Kang planning revenge against Sim for his persistent persecution, he warns them against it, but he too is torn between his loyalty toward his own men and the sense of duty that he feels as an officer:

But Yi suppressed the emotion that was boiling over inside. He remembered that he too was an army officer. Second Lieutenant Sim's conduct was thoroughly despicable, but the necessity for the group to hold fast to basic rank and order was more important.³⁷

Yi's relationships with his men and his superiors are continually bringing him into this type of internal conflict as he tries to reconcile the values he has been educated in as an officer with his more fundamental humanistic ideals. In the end, however, Kang does manage to take revenge on Sim in such a way as to avoid being punished for his act of insubordination, and once again Yi responds ambiguously, feeling a sense of anger at Kang's devious flouting of military order but ultimately accepting the situation, as in his heart he recognizes both the justice of Kang's act and the fact that he needs the cooperation and support of Kang to accomplish his own duties as an officer effectively.

As the maneuvers continue, Yi reflects on the cruelty and mechanical nature of modern technological warfare:

"Now our wars have become so that we can't see the enemy . . ."

"Not being able to see the enemy—that must be why modern war is so cruel. Xiang Yu³⁸ lost everything because he massacred soldiers who had surrendered,

37. Yi Munyŏl, *Saeha'ok*, 86.

38. Xiang Yu (233-202 B.C.) together with Liu Bang was largely responsible for overthrowing the Qin Empire. As Charles Hucker writes, "Hsiang (Xiang) outraged Liu by vengefully

and those Nazis and Japanese generals who mistreated prisoners were punished as war criminals. But the generals of modern warfare who order the firing of shells and missiles are not held responsible at all.”³⁹

In ironic contrast with Yi's earlier reassurance to Private Kim that no one gets harmed on maneuvers, the head of personnel visits Yi's section to warn the soldiers against accidents as already many of the soldiers participating in the exercise have lost their lives. One drunken soldier was crushed to death by a tank while he was sleeping in a field, another burned to death when his petrol-soaked clothes caught fire. A medical orderly died after drinking methyl alcohol thinking it was ethyl alcohol. Another soldier was electrocuted and three more asphyxiated after spending the night in a charcoal burner's hut to keep warm. Furthermore, it is reported that Sergeant Mun has been seriously injured in a truck crash, in which he and the other soldiers were all drunk.

The futility of these deaths and injuries, which are made even more meaningless by the fact that they have occurred during what was supposed to have been a harmless army training exercise rather than an actual conflict, underlines Yi Munyŏl's pessimism about the ability of human beings to control their own destiny. In all cases the victims of the accidents died as a result of their own human fallibility and weakness. This view of the common lot of humanity has much in common with that of the existentialist philosopher Karl Jaspers, who wrote:

I must die, I must suffer, I must struggle, I am subject to chance, I involve myself inexorably in guilt. We call these fundamental situations of our existence ultimate situations. That is to say, they are situations which we cannot evade or change.⁴⁰

After making a mistake on the penultimate day of maneuvers by getting lost in the mountains, even the conscientious Lieutenant Yi suffers physical and verbal abuse from his commanding officer:

devastating the surrendered capital, and he steadily alienated other supporters by similar cruelties . . .” Charles O. Hucker, *China's Imperial Past: An Introduction to Chinese History and Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975), 122. The reference to a Tang poem in the title of the work and this reference to Chinese history suggest that even at this early stage in his career, Yi was well read not only in the philosophy and literature of the West but was also familiar with the East Asian literary tradition.

39. Yi Munyŏl, *Saeha'gok*, 86.

40. K. Jaspers, *Way to Wisdom*, trans. R. Mannheim (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), 20.

“You bastard, I should shoot you. What do you think you were doing rushing off like that, you idiot.”

The commander let fly mercilessly against Lieutenant Yi’s shins with his army boots.⁴¹

Recovering from the injuries done both to his pride and his shins, Yi seeks out Sergeant Kang only to find Corporal Pak. At this point Yi challenges Pak’s negative view of army life, maintaining that there is no fundamental difference between life in the army and life in society. This discussion is crucial to a central theme of the novella concerning human freedom and the relationship of the individual to society, and Lieutenant Yi seems to speak for the author when he states: “In this age there is still no pure individual existence. Wherever we go, we become attached to some group, and that group will also force its rules and hierarchy upon us.”⁴² It is also through this discussion that the author clearly reveals that the absurdities and cruelties of army life are also those of Korean society at large and by extension human life in general.

Nevertheless, for Yi Munyöl, there is an enduring source of absolute value to be found in nature itself—although its beauty is not always perceived by people. It is only on the last day of the maneuvers that the frozen wintry landscape of Mt. Ch’önma, which has hitherto only seemed to reflect the bleakness of the lonely soldiers’ souls, is transformed in the perception of Lieutenant Yi into a scene of beauty:

The winter plain which had only been desolate to him, he now felt to be a lovely and beautiful sight. Here and there along the roadside even the tangle of white frosted barbed-wire along the snow-splashed front line looked like a brilliant and delicate garland. The shabby-looking, concrete barracks buildings now seemed cozy like the thatched cottages of his hometown. Suddenly he gazed upon all these things with tenderness.⁴³

This moment of transcendence, however, in which Yi perceives the absolute values of truth, beauty and love in nature, is immediately undermined by thoughts of the “prison house” of the industrialized society by which he is

41. Yi Munyöl, *Saeha’gok*, 91.

42. Ibid., p. 95. In “An Interview with Yi Munyöl” (p. 116) Yi describes his own view of human freedom as follows: “As for ideology, in the past all ideologies were unjust. My own political conviction is a form of liberalism that is neither American-style capitalism nor Russian-style socialism. Nowadays there are also many different concepts of ‘liberalism,’ but I would like to pursue the most ideal, purest meaning of liberalism.”

43. Yi Munyöl, *Saeha’gok*, 100.

surrounded:

Would he ever be able to dash across this wild plain again in this youthful frame? He would be quitting the army in June, and if there were no big changes, he would enter the big company which had given him his university scholarship and spend the rest of his life imprisoned in a complex electronic circuit.⁴⁴

The novella closes with the elation of a successful final day of maneuvers for Lieutenant Yi's platoon. But the jubilation of the soldiers is short-lived. First it is revealed that Private Ch'ön, who had absconded during the confusion of the military exercise, is suspected of defecting to North Korea, for which Yi is reprimanded. Private Ch'ön, a minor figure in the novella, may be seen as representing those post-liberation Koreans who opted for communism, not out of ideological grounds but rather because their own situation in the South was so wretched.

At a celebration party Sergeant Kang gets drunk and finally opens his heart to Yi about his past. It turns out that he had been at the military academy when he lost faith in what he was doing and got himself expelled for brawling with a policeman. The invincible Kang then finally confesses his self-disgust at the pettiness of his life in the army. At this moment, in a scene reminiscent of the denouement in the closing act of a Shakespearian tragedy, news comes of the accidental death of Sergeant Mun, the revelation that the murdered prostitute had been his former lover and that it was Mun who had murdered her. No sooner has all this been reported than the suicide of Private Kim is also discovered. This discovery evokes the twin lament of a veteran munitions officer and Lieutenant Yi:

"It was always like that. I remember in Vietnam I never saw many guys killed by the guns of the Vietcong. They died like that, by themselves. They died on top of a girl, they died while drinking, they died gambling, they died losing their minds because they couldn't see the enemy, or they just died of homesickness . . ."

An officer in charge of munitions had arrived and was speaking without emotion when Lieutenant Yi, his mind blank and oblivious of the commander next to him, blurted out suddenly:

"That's exactly the despair of a soldier . . ."⁴⁵

44. Yi Munyöl, *Saeha'gok*, 100. For Yi T'aedong, it is this conflict between the group and the individual ("*chiptan kwa kaein*") that forms the core theme of the novella. See Yi T'aedong, "Chölmang üi hyönsanghak" [The phenomenology of despair], in *Kim Yunsik oe 16 in p'yöngnon moüm, Yi Munyöl ron* (Seoul: Saminhaeng, 1991), 242.

45. Yi Munyöl, *Saeha'gok*, 114.

This final statement with its bitter criticism and yet pessimistic acceptance of life, has been identified by Söng Minyöp as being the key to Yi Munyöl's artistic vision.⁴⁶ Unlike Yi's later work *Kŭ hae kyöul* (The winter of that year) that ends with the impending arrival of spring, symbolizing new hope, however, this earlier work ends on a fundamentally pessimistic note. Despite moments of humanity, compassion, beauty, and elation, the underlying human condition is presented by the author as being essentially one of hopelessness.

Conclusion

The words O'Rourke writes of the early Korean naturalist Kim Tongin seem equally applicable to Yi Munyöl's point of view in *Saeha'ok*:

There is a continuing conflict between the spiritual and physical in man. Man's ultimate purpose in life is the attainment of happiness; but no matter how he pursues his object, happiness and perfection elude him. He is doomed to inevitable defeat, because the spiritual in him can never master the physical.⁴⁷

Nevertheless, Yi Munyöl's pessimism may also be taken as evidence of the author's deeper idealistic nature. It is precisely because of this idealism that the author is able to express so clearly humanity's failure to attain that ideal. Because the author does have a framework of values against which to judge the human actions in the story, he is able to evoke a cathartic response of pity and sorrow in the reader. These values are not overtly expressed, and yet they are implicit in the consciousness of Lieutenant Yi, the compassionate protagonist of the story.

As has been mentioned, the pessimistic vision of Yi Munyöl's debut work, involving insanity, despair, suicide and murder, has much in common with the Korean naturalist tradition which prevailed in the 1920s under the harsh conditions of Japanese colonialism, conditions which were to some extent replicated under the autocratic rule of President Park Chung Hee, who was himself a former officer in the Japanese Army during the colonial period. Yi's later works, however, may be seen as an attempt to chart a way out of this despairing vision toward a more positive view of human existence and in so doing reveal a shift away from existentialism, which has its roots in the

46. Söng Minyöp, "Kaein kwa chayu rül hyanghan yölmang" [The longing for individuality and freedom], in *Kim Yunsik oe 16 in p'yöngnon moim, Yi Munyöl ron*, 80.

47. Kevin O' Rourke, "The Korean Short Story and Naturalism," 45.

Western philosophical tradition, and a return to the more conservative strands of the intellectual traditions of East Asia.⁴⁸

48. For example, in the preface of his novel *Hwangje rŭl wihayŏ* [In the name of the Emperor] (1986), Yi wrote, “The members of today’s younger generation, while they read the works of Plato and Aristotle, think that the Four Books and Three Classics are out of date and don’t read them. While they admire Baudelaire, it is rare to find someone who knows about Li He 李賀. While they idolize Nietzsche, they do not even try to understand Zhuangzi, and while they know about Robert Owen, they are unfamiliar with Xuzi 許子 . . . Just as Westerners are not ashamed to trace the roots of their tradition to the Greek and Roman cultures, we should not be ashamed to trace our traditional roots to the East Asian cultural sphere that was established centering on the Han Chinese.” Quoted from Yi Munyŏl, *Hwangje rŭl wihayŏ*, 2nd ed. (Seoul: Koryŏwŏn, 1991), author’s preface, 7-8.