Partition, Cold War, and literary decolonization in post-Liberation Korea

It is a fact well acknowledged that the decision to make the thirty-eighth degree north latitude the dividing line between the Koreas was arbitrarily and hastily made by two American military officers at the imminent end of World War II. History shows that this national partition by outside agents exacerbated, if not caused, national and ideological conflicts on the Korean Peninsula rather than regulated or resolved them. This chapter traces how mid-century Korean writers understood the thirty-eighth parallel as the inter-Korean border during the first few years after liberation and demonstrates how postcolonial Korean literature employs a literary trope of crossing the thirty-eighth parallel as a critique of the Cold War binary. The chapter focuses on the five-year period, which I call the post-Liberation period, from the 1945 liberation from the Japanese Empire to the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950, when the thirty-eighth parallel was rendered obsolete with the onset of a hot war.

In English-language scholarship, the history of Korea since 1945 is a Cold War history; it cannot be discussed without paying attention to the birth and development of two rival states separated by ideology. While there are a number of historical studies focusing on the post-Liberation period as the origin of the Cold War on the Korean Peninsula, relatively few scholarly works paid attention to post-Liberation cultural production. Those few works tend to regard the literature and culture of this time as testifying to the emergence of the regional, political, and ideological confrontations between the Republic of Korea (ROK) and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK). Charles Armstrong’s groundbreaking essay on the cultural Cold War in 1945–50 Korea examines the American occupation policies in southern Korea and some of the Soviet equivalents in northern Korea to trace the origins of the political polarization in Korea’s cultural production. In Theodore Hughes’s important book on Cold War Korean literature, he sheds light on several exceptional literary works that criticize and are at odds with the Cold War state ideology, but he also views late 1940s Korean literature as ultimately complying with, or even serving to strengthen, respective state narratives: capitalist developmentalism in the south and socialism in the north. While it is certain that the emerging Cold War had an overwhelming effect on the post-1945 Korean cultural sphere as both scholars aptly demonstrate,
such an approach that prioritizes the dominant American occupation policy and the following indigenous (albeit US-sponsored) state policy in reading South Korean literature is to relegate the responses, struggles, or resistances against Cold War ideologies made by local actors to insignificance. Conscious of the weightiness of the Cold War in Korea, this chapter calls into question the foregrounding of the US-imposed Cold War in the Korean literary landscape.

Over the past decade, Cold War studies have made a right turn toward criticizing the privileging of Western experience in Cold War scholarship and paying attention to the global Cold War in various regions of the world. Reading South Korean literature from the perspective of US Cold War policy does not privilege Western experience but does imply a Western (US-oriented) epistemological stance. This chapter focuses more on literary strategies employed by mid-century Korean writers challenging US political dominance and in so doing, aims to contribute to contemporary Cold War scholarship, which investigates varied interactions and inflections between divergent decolonizing processes and the Cold War ideological hegemony.

The strong Cold War framework structuring post-1945 Korean literature is problematic also because it comes more from contemporary projections than from a basis on mid-century Korean people and society—which I call the privileging of contemporary understandings of the Cold War. From a historical vantage point, conscious of the tragic ramifications of the enduring Cold War in Korea, scholars often seem to forget that, at the time, the national divide was not considered a permanent condition; it was viewed as temporary or reversible. That perception of temporary division was concerned with Korea’s colonial experience under the thirty-five years of Japanese rule. Koreans in 1945 were those who had experienced colonialism for their entire lives or, at the shortest estimate, the last half of their lives. When they witnessed the denouement of colonial rule and quickly encountered foreign occupation and national division against their will, the forced divide was for them physical proof of another foreign domination that was expected to, and ought to, end eventually, much like Japan’s colonial rule.

The view that the US occupation was a reiteration of Japanese colonial domination stands out, for instance, in Dawn Wind (Hyop’ung) a 1948 newspaper-serialized novel by Yŏm Sangsŏp, which I discuss next. The novel’s main protagonist criticizes US exploitation of Korean resources, questioning, “Don’t you know how much tungsten and red ginseng are shipped to America? Red ginseng was taken by Mitsui in the Japanese colonial time, wasn’t it? Which American Mitsui would come this time?” The novel repeatedly describes the United States as an equivalent of Japanese imperialism. In addition to the recognition of economic exploitation by US capital, it keenly captures the cultural hegemony of the United States in postcolonial Korea with a focus on the privileged status of the English language, now replacing the Japanese. A critique of the United States as a neocolonial force in South Korea is commonly known to be connected with the 1980s anti-Americanism propagated by radical left-wing student activists and, as such, labeled leftist thought. But Dawn Wind demonstrates that mid-century Koreans already recognized, at least for the brief moment between liberation and war, the US as another empire advancing on the Korean Peninsula.

The post-Liberation period is thus not a time of discontinuity, in which the newly emerging Cold War overwhelmed pre-1945 experience, but a time when colonial experience determined Koreans’ interactions with the Cold War. Korean literature studies that define post-1945 literature as Cold War literature tend to underestimate the unwillingness of local actors to comply with the imposed division and their attempts to challenge it and search for a path to unification. Even if the resistance to the Cold War eventually failed, those attempts are worth noting as a decolonization project to escape from US imperialism. One of the efforts in the literature challenging the imposed border is the portrayal of crossing of the thirty-eighth parallel, an act of resistance undertaken by several Korean writers in the second half of the 1940s.
Border crossings

Complexity in crossing the thirty-eighth parallel:
writer Yi T’aejun’s case

The act of crossing the inter-Korean border is a subversive act in both Koreas, which means to choose one political regime or ideology over the other. The Korean words to designate an act of crossing the inter-Korean border, 육북 (crossing to the north) and 육남 (crossing to the south), reflect the emphasis on the destination—that is, which side is chosen after the transgression of the border. The border itself is often omitted. The current uncrossable border, which was settled on the armistice table at the end of the Korean War in 1953, is called by several names, such as the military demarcation line, the armistice line, or, more widely known, the demilitarized zone (DMZ)—a term that includes its buffer area. Even these are easily confused and used interchangeably with thirty-eighth parallel, the initial border before the war. The thirty-eighth parallel is still, mistakenly, used as a symbol of the North–South divide. But the implications of the thirty-eighth parallel in the post-Liberation period are different from the inter-Korean border that we know and experience today. Next I examine one case of a writer’s border crossing that shows the overprojection of the contemporary rigid Cold War perspective described earlier.

It was a surprising event in the postcolonial Korean literary scene that Yi T’aejun, a renowned modernist writer from the colonial period, secretly left Seoul for the north of the thirty-eighth parallel in late 1946. It was a surprise because he had never been a socialist writer or even a sympathizer and because his literature lacked explicit political messages. Regarding his unexpected migration to the north, Yi’s contemporary writers or early literary critics tended to consider it a spur-of-the-moment choice driven by a personal acquaintance, his romanticist nature, or a misunderstanding of the socialist ideology and the north Korean situation rather than made by rational judgment. On the other hand, recent Korean scholarship on Yi T’aejun and his post-1945 literature attributes his decision to go north to his ideological conversion to the left or a reflection of his political affiliation.

As an explanation for Yi T’aejun’s heading north, scholars often cite Yi’s sudden and active engagement with the Korean Writers’ Alliance (Chosŏn munhakka tongmaeng), a leftist writers’ organization of the post-Liberation era that supported the political stance of the South Korean Workers’ Party (Nam-Chosŏn nodongdang) and its leader Pak Hŏnyŏng. But Kim Chae Yong, a contemporary South Korean literary historian, introduces an interesting perspective on Yi’s decision to go north. He argues that Yi T’aejun did not intend to leave for the north permanently when he departed but merely planned to accompany a delegation of the Korean-Soviet Culture Society (Cho-Sio munhuwa hyŏphoe) to visit the Soviet Union. Yi decided to be a delegate to the Soviet Union in July 1946, which could be a dangerous move under the US occupation. Thus, he lied that he had to go to his old house in Anhŏp, a small town north of the thirty-eighth parallel, where he stayed during the last years of colonial rule, in order to sell the house that he had left upon hearing the news of liberation. When he returned to Pyongyang from the Soviet Union in October 1946, however, Seoul was in a turbulent situation later called the October Uprising. Many leftists had already gone north or underground. This perilous situation seems to have compelled him to remain in Pyongyang rather than return to Seoul.

As shown in Yi’s unexpected decision to stay north, his sudden border crossing was not an irreversible decision choosing the northern regime over the southern. It is more accurate to say that it was due to various factors, including broader sociopolitical circumstances. I instead say that Yi T’aejun’s sudden dedication to political issues in post-1945 Korea and the following 육북 had to do with multifarious factors—not only his recent political affiliation but also long-standing inner conflicts, such as the sense of shame and self-recrimination over his
inactivity as a public intellectual during the colonial period to which he alludes in his autobiographical fiction “Before and After Liberation” (“Haebang chŏnhu,” 1946),¹⁴ hope for a new socialist system after his travel to the USSR (shown in his 1947 travelogue, *Travel to the Soviet Union* [*Soryŏn kihaejang*]),¹⁵ and the deteriorated external circumstances of southern Korea after his return from the USSR, to name a few.

The weight of crossing the border at that time seems to have been lighter than what we now ascribe to the act in hindsight. The relative ease in crossing the border does not necessarily downplay the gravity of this dangerous decision by those who risked their lives by doing so. I am not trying to argue that Yi T’aegun’s *wŏlbuk* was purely coincidental but to show that the act of crossing the thirty-eighth parallel depended on more nuanced and uncertain vagaries and vicissitudes of life and by itself must be regarded as an ongoing act rather than a completed, one-time act of conviction. Yi’s later tragic ending, which resulted from the purge of the South Korean Workers’ Party members in North Korea after the Korean War, has made his crossing north with an anticipated return to the south understood to be a matter of the Manichean choice between conflicting ideologies.

**Border crossing as disclosing lies, witnessing reality**

Keeping in mind that the act of border crossing has been interpreted through the lens of a retroactive foregrounding of ideological and political polarization, I next examine the implications of the literary trope of border crossing portrayed by Yŏm Sangsŏp and Yi T’aegun. Yŏm Sangsŏp had serialized *Dawn Wind* in the newspaper *Free News* (*Chayu shinmun*) from January 1 to November 3, 1948—that is, nearly for the entire year. It is deemed one of the post-Liberation masterpieces, capturing “the whole national reality immediately after liberation.”¹⁶ Set in US-occupied Seoul in 1948, *Dawn Wind* delineates love and political and ideological conflicts among two young men and two young women as the main plot. Hyeran, a young woman working at an antique shop catering to American customers, and Pyŏngjik, a newspaper reporter, are two main protagonists and a couple. Their love is interrupted by two obstacles: Baker, an American gentleman, woos Hyeran and suggests she come to study in the United States, and Hwasun, a leftist journalist, wants Pyŏngjik to go with her to the Soviet-occupied north across the thirty-eighth parallel. Pyŏngjik, claiming himself to be a true representative of Koreans and to belong neither to the left nor to the right, keeps a critical eye on the US Army Military Government in Korea (USAMGIK), which makes people label him as a leftist in spite of his claim. After experiencing a series of events, including involvement in an arrest of a wanted leftist and an attack on the street by right-wing activists, Pyŏngjik suddenly disappears to go north with Hwasun. While making every effort to regain him, his lover Hyeran shows an understanding of why he wanted to go north. In the end, Hwasun alone crosses the border while Pyŏngjik is caught by the police on the way north and returns to Hyeran. He decides to remain in Korea to study and seek a means for national unification there, asserting no need to go to the Soviet Union or the United States.

The biggest conflict in *Dawn Wind* arises with Pyŏngjik’s disappearance to cross the thirty-eighth parallel following Hwasun. While being labeled as a Red, he has made clear, up to that moment, his distance from both the right-wing and the left-wing ideologies as typically defined and seems to love Hyeran more than Hwasun, who wants him to go north with her. Thus, his abrupt choice to head north surprises readers as well as the novel’s characters, including his lover Hyeran.

The novel shows two reasons why people decide to go north. One is represented by the leftist Hwasun. From the outset, her decision to *wŏlbuk* is impulsive rather than premeditated. The three Korean protagonists—Pyŏngjik, Hyeran, and Hwasun—happen to get involved in a
 policeraid to arrest a wanted leftist activist at a restaurant and are detained at the police station overnight. At that point, Hwasun makes up her mind to cross the thirty-eighth parallel: “One night’s and one day’s experience for the first time in her life at the police station seemed to agitate her thoughts as well as excite her emotionally” (81). She seems “like a different person from yesterday’s Hwasun” when she insists that she would go north and try to take Pyŏngjik with her (82). It surely cannot be denied that Hwasun’s decision is partly due to her worry about losing Pyŏngjik to Hyeran if they remain in the south. Even when her romantic rival, Hyeran, is present, she pesters Pyŏngjik to go north with her, “acting like a baby.” Hwasun appears to be a whimsical, emotional girl who does not want to lose her love interest rather than a serious leftist ideologue deciding to head north because of her political beliefs; such a critical life decision is made on a whim, with no serious ideological inner conflict revealed. Certainly, Yŏn Sangsŏp does not favorably portray Hwasun’s spur-of-the-moment and self-centered decision to cross the border.

The second motive, revealed in Pyŏngjik’s sudden decision to head north and Hyeran’s response to it, is worthier of attention than Hwasun’s border crossing. Pyŏngjik does not take the same ideological stance as Hwasun does, nor does he love her. So why on earth does he suddenly make up his mind to cross the thirty-eighth parallel, following her? The novel leaves Pyŏngjik’s motive in crossing the border rather ambiguous. A scholar of Korean literature suggests that this ambiguity was probably derived from the author’s own experience of being arrested by the police when he was serializing Dawn Wind.17 The fear of a second incarceration may have kept him from recounting the border crossing in full detail. Yet because the narrative of Dawn Wind is largely, although not entirely, focalized on Hyeran (rather than Pyŏngjik), Pyŏngjik’s internal thoughts often remain inarticulate. The ambiguity of his motives thus does not seem to create a hole in the narrative. In addition, considering that the fiction’s heroin is Hyeran and not Hwasun and that the narrator never makes a positive portrait of Hwasun throughout the novel, it would be a far stretch to infer that the author originally intended a denouement in which the two protagonists end up being parted by the inter-Korean border. Rather, the current ending of Dawn Wind, in which Pyŏngjik returns to Seoul aiming to find a solution for Korea’s unification, as a matter of fact delivers a key message of the novel.

Heading north is, in the beginning of the narrative, imagined not as a permanent move but as intended to be followed by a return to the south. The line of the thirty-eighth parallel is not considered yet a fixed border but is flexible, temporary, and uncertain, and thus, crossing the border is more easily imagined and achieved. The following dialogue between Pyŏngjik and Hyeran demonstrates well the temporariness or flexibility of the thirty-eighth parallel:

“So, you don’t really intend to follow after her, do you?”
“I want to give it a try, to go once just to look around . . .”
“What’s wrong with you? Are you teasing me?” cried Hyeran, scolding him.
“But the reason why I want to go is different from Hwasun’s. It’s not that following after Hwasun either . . .”
Hyeran’s brother, who leads a right-wing youth organization, sometimes says that wanting to go north comes out of wanting to observe what northern Korea really looks like.
Hyeran thinks that this may be a common sentiment or common wish of today’s young people.18

Borrowing Hyeran’s voice, the author says that young people in the Korea of his time had a shared wish to go to northern Korea. Even after Pyŏngjik really leaves her for Hwasun, Hyeran is portrayed to be generous with him, based on an understanding that “young people of the time could not help doing [going north] as Pyŏngjik has done” (227). The novel emphasizes the
“common wish,” the common ground behind the act of crossing the thirty-eighth parallel. The act results from a curiosity and from the effort and urgent desire of “today’s youth” to figure out where the nation stands at present and to search for a better future for it.

The shared dream of young people in southern Korea derived from the absence of an official channel through which to hear what was going on in northern Korea, only hearsay from those who came down from the north. Listening to the news from the north was regarded as a subversive and thus risk-taking behavior. In southern Korea, the news about the north was peppered with the USAMGIK’s anticommunist propaganda. The desire to go north testifies to the public’s lack of faith in the official statements of the USAMGIK. The decision to head north does not at all reflect a preference for the northern regime over that of southern Korea. It merely stems from an interest in seeing for oneself how northern Korea was really doing.

The wish to learn about the other side of the thirty-eighth parallel is not limited to southern Korea. A symmetrical attempt can be found as well in literature produced in the other half of the Korean Peninsula. Yi T’aejun’s “Dust” (“Mŏnji”), a short story published in the DPRK in March 1950, portrays the main protagonist heading south across the thirty-eighth parallel only because he could never believe what newspapers said about the south. This story is set in 1948, after the separate South Korean general election was held and right before the time when the South Korean government was established, which exactly coincides with the temporal setting of *Dawn Wind*. The main protagonist of “Dust,” Mr. Hanmoe, feels certain that “the political line of northern Korea is right.” But he does not trust north Korean newspapers’ descriptions of south Korean situations, saying that he has not seen them with his own eyes. Hence, he risks crossing the thirty-eighth parallel to go down to visit his daughter’s family, which is living in the southern part of Korea.

One can read the short story not only as a bitter critique of the US occupation of southern Korea but also as an endorsement of the Kim Il Sung regime. What Mr. Hanmoe finds in Seoul is economic anomie, marked by skyrocketing prices and the devaluation of Korean money caused by the inflow of dollars, serious political unrest resulting from the people’s strong resistance to the USAMGIK and its brutality in suppressing dissent, as well as Americans’ contempt and denigration of precious old Korean culture. Overlooking the main street in Seoul, especially Kyŏngbok Palace, which is used for the US military quarters and packed with army vehicles and soldiers, Hanmoe recalls the Japanese colonial period, when pro-Japanese collaborators also freely came to and from the royal palaces. “Dust” shows the similar critical recognition of the US occupation to *Dawn Wind*, according to which southern Korea is again being colonized but this time by the United States. Readers might anticipate the political implication of the story based on the author Yi’s affiliation with the northern regime. In spite of the strong political rhetoric that Yi adopts, however, the fact that Hanmoe was initially curious about the reality in south Korea suggests a subtle refutation or mistrust of north Korean propaganda. In other words, the story casts doubt over the regime’s propaganda even while manifesting leftist political propensity. Unfortunately for Yi, this rift in the narrative did not go unnoticed by the DPRK authorities in the process of purging writers who were affiliated with the South Korean Workers’ Party in 1953. A North Korean literary history, written in 1994, still considers Yi T’aejun a reactionary for depicting the protagonist in “Dust” as someone who does not completely believe that north Korea is better than south Korea because he has not seen it for himself.

These two literary works, *Dawn Wind* and “Dust”—one by a writer who went to the south across the thirty-eighth parallel and the other by a writer who went to the north respectively—together suggest that there was a lack of trust between the authorities and the Korean masses in both the north and the south in the post-Liberation period and that the severing of exchanges
between the two Koreas impelled the border crossings in both directions. Therefore, the act of border crossing is to witness the reality of the other half of the nation, to figure out the fate of the Korean nation, and to deny and criticize the imposed border causing the divide.

Border crossing twice: the severity and tragedy of the Cold War

In this section, I take a closer look at “Dust” in order to explore how the narrative elaborates on the act of border crossing, what drives the act, and how it criticizes the Cold War’s severity. This short story depicts two attempts to cross the thirty-eighth parallel, which have completely different implications from each other.

Yi T’aejun’s short stories and essays, as represented well in his colonial period works, such as “Taedong River is Frozen” (“P’aegangnaeng,” 1938), are characterized by a bittersweet nostalgia for the vanishing beauty of the old and a critique of the complicity of the colonial rule with modernization, which makes old Korean traditions gradually obsolete. Such longing for the disappearing old values remains in his post-Liberation literary works, including “Before and After Liberation” and “Dust.” The continuous romantic antiquarianism in “Dust” stands out even compared to Yi’s other works published after his wŏlbuk in 1946, such as in his short story collections Farmland (Nongt’o, 1948) and The First Combat (Ch’ŏt chŏnt’u, 1949), not to mention those works of Yi’s contemporaries published in northern Korea during the post-Liberation period, which are full of intense and hostile language toward enemies and a strong commitment to the state ideology.

The fiction’s main protagonist, Mr. Hanmoe, is an antiquarian book collector who loves “old Korean things,” which is why he has given himself a pseudonym, hanmoe, an archaic, non-sinographic Korean word for “big mountain.” During the colonial period, he strove to preserve Korean cultural traditions, as revealed in a phrase such as “I would burn my books with my own hand rather than giving them away to the Japanese Empire and letting them work to distort and fabricate Korean culture and history!” This loyal guardian of Korean tradition, interestingly, decides to cross to the south for the reason of clearly seeing the true situation of southern Korea with his own eyes a few days ahead of the three-year anniversary of liberation.

The more fundamental motivation for heading south, however, is based on his yearning to go to Seoul—to meet his old friends and scholars who would be able to appreciate the genuine value of his precious book collection, to show off his acquisitions to them, and further to contribute to the cultivation of Korean culture by means of his rare book collection:

But in the meantime, Mr. Hanmoe became more eager to go to Seoul. There were more friends with like minds in Seoul, who understand well about his strenuous efforts collecting all these books and the values and characteristics of his collection, and who have been envious of it for a long time. If the nation would be unified and stabilized, and the masses’ attention to and passion for culture are elevated all over the country, he hoped to make a public exhibition of his treasured rare books, which would astonish the academic world, and to dedicate the books proudly to the nation or a university, winning the admiration of and praise from many friends and scholars.

For Hanmoe, Seoul—surely a metonym of southern Korea—is a place of a number of good memories as well a place be with his like-minded friends, an emotional home. By contrast, Hanmoe does not even share a list of his entire book collection with scholars from the prestigious Kim Il Sung University in the north. His honest wish to contribute to the preservation of Korean tradition, to associate with kindred colleagues who could understand the value of his efforts, to gain their recognition and admiration, or to accomplish personal professional success
would be regarded as self-centered, reactionary, or bourgeois in northern Korea—although we
know that such personal, or professional for that matter, desires to achieve social recognition
among peers can be as important for a human life as any political commitments.

“Dust” shows Hammoe’s awakening from this nostalgic, individualistic former self into the
full realization of the true legitimacy of the northern socialist regime through his crossing to
the south and witnessing of corrupt south Korean politics, ordinary people’s miserable lives, and
fierce resistances to the US military and the Syngman Rhee regimes. In other words, the act of
border crossing is strategically staged in the fiction for an acute critique of the contemporary
southern regime. It is difficult, however, to view Hammoe’s antiquarian penchant and senti-
mental longing for Seoul as merely elements all to be rejected eventually in the development
of the ideology-driven narrative to the extent that Hammoe is depicted as an outdated figure
who struggles to fit into the new time—stubbornly, almost sadly, loyal to traditional Korean
culture and values to the last. He is like a reincarnation of another fictional character created
by Yi T’aejun in his 1946 fiction “Before and After Liberation.” In that story, Kim Chigwŏn, an
old-fashioned Confucian scholar much like Hammoe, represents vanishing Korean traditions,
struggling to reconcile with the new era, and eventually “dimly sinking down, like a speck of
dust, into the turbulence of world history.” The image of a speck of dust in the vortex of his-
story reappears likewise in Hammoe’s daughter’s reproaching of her father:

“Why can’t you surely participate in the side you think is right according to your judg-
ment? I’m saying you should tightly stick to the side you think is right. Do you know
how the time these days is rapidly spinning? If you just wander around like this, you
will be blown away. You cannot become a hero of history, but at least, you shouldn’t become a
speck of dust in history!”

In the penultimate scene in “Dust,” Hammoe looks over the wide main street in front of
Kwanghwamun, packed with “the US Army vehicles swarming like ants.” This city view is
also an exact reiteration of the ending scene of “Before and After Liberation,” in which the main
protagonist, Hyŏn, observes Kim disappearing into “the US Army Jeeps swarming like whirligig
beetles.” The juxtaposition of an old man from Korea’s ancient regime with the foreign mili-
tary is distinct in both of the works, focusing on obsolete figures under the rapidly changing
political circumstances. Why did Yi summon this character again, who was already antiquated in
1946, and give him another failure—Hammoe is shot at the border in the end—in spite of his
awakening and resolution not to become “a speck of dust?”

There is a critical difference in the descriptions of the two similar characters. In the 1946
story, Kim is a mere object of the gaze taken by the main protagonist, Hyŏn, but Hammoe shows
up as a protagonist himself in “Dust.” While Hyŏn, Yi T’aejun’s fictional persona, sadly looks at
Kim, who lags behind the historical changes and is disappearing into the past, the external nar-
rator in “Dust” does not establish a clear distance from Hammoe. In “Before and After Libera-
tion,” Kim is an already-bygone figure in comparison with Hyŏn’s optimistic anticipation of the
upcoming future. On the other hand, it is difficult to simply consider Hammoe as a man of the
past, because by closely following Hammoe’s inner conflicts, frustrations, changes in thought and
political stance in this confusing time, Yi T’aejun invites the reader to sympathize with, rather
than criticize, Hammoe. His portrayal, bewildered between the two opposing regimes, reluctant
or refusing to take one side over the other, could reflect any Korean: frustrated with the Cold
War and barely managing a way to survive in the post-Liberation period. Therefore, Hammoe
sympathetically engages in the challenges and concerns of the contemporary time, though both
he and Kim share Yi’s old antiquarianism and interest in the preservation of Korean traditional
culture. “Dust” pays close attention to those who cannot commit to one ideology or one place, no matter how hard they make an effort to be a part of the new Cold War era.

After witnessing the turbulent, brutal reality in the south, Hanmoe finally decides to go back north. His return, crossing the border a second time to the north after experiencing southern Korea, is supposed to be a decision made with a firm commitment to the northern socialist regime. As soon as he chooses the regime he would belong to, however, he ironically fails to cross the border. To Hanmoe, who was forced to choose one side over the other eventually, the thirty-eighth parallel now stands as an insurmountable national border, with all the concomitant rule of order and law, restrictions of free crossing, guarded by guns, as contemporary Koreans know all too well. At first, the thirty-eighth parallel is easily crossable when there is a possibility for a border crosser to criticize the partition and to cast doubt on the regime that they belong to. But it starts to operate as an impassable barrier, an overwhelming force imposing restrictions on the border crosser—now an interloper or defector—when they finally surrender to the system that has compelled them to choose. Hanmoe’s death at the thirty-eighth parallel, the ultimate failure of his border crossing, thus represents a desperate and devastating critique of the division imposed by Cold War ideologies. By portraying Hanmoe’s death at the border, Yi T’aejun reveals the severity of the system, which never allows a speck of doubt, and the impossibility of surviving without having, or pretending to have, a commitment to the Cold War under the oppressive and artificial divide of the nation.

**Conclusion**

_Wŏlbuk_ and _wŏllam_ in post-Liberation literature imply vigorous, rebellious, and hopeful efforts, with a will to overcome the national crisis of partition set forcefully in place by imperial powers. Both writers, Yŏm Sangsŏp and Yi T’aejun, who crossed to the south and crossed to the north, respectively, in their real lives, portray the crossing of the thirty-eighth parallel in opposite directions and want to imagine the reality of the other side of Korea. The literary trope of crossing the inter-Korean border shows an attempt to imagine the other half, which is forbidden by the system to imagine, and to blur the border by putting this imagination into action. The fictional border crossers never willingly accept the officially declared two nation-states.

Focusing on literary strategies devised by postcolonial Korean writers against the Cold War, this chapter has tried to revisit the American-centered Cold War framework for reading post-Liberation literature. Decolonization in many non-Western countries interacts with and is inflected by Cold War politics. The intersections between decolonization and the Cold War seem to be similar, but upon closer scrutiny, each decolonizing project reveals unique distinctions. Post-Liberation Korean literature shows one variation within global Cold War literature with its trope of crossing the inter-Korean border.

**Notes**

2. In Brendan O’Leary’s definition of the types of partition, he sees partition intended to regulate or resolve national, ethnic, or communal conflicts. O’Leary, “Partition,” 31–4.
3. Since the post-Liberation period includes both before and after the establishment of the separate regimes in 1948, in this chapter, I designate the US-occupied territory in the south below the thirty-eighth parallel as lowercase south or southern Korea, and the Soviet-occupied northern region as north or northern Korea, to make a distinction from the current nation-states, capitalized South Korea and North Korea.
4. As for historical studies focused on the post-Liberation period, see Cumings, _The Origins of the Korean War_, vols. 1 and 2; Armstrong, _North Korean Revolution_; Kim, _Everyday Life in the North Korean Revolution_, among other things.
5 Armstrong, “Cultural Cold War.”
6 Hughes, Literature and Film in Cold War South Korea, 61–90.
8 Yŏm Sangsŏp, Hyop’’ung, 112 (Hereafter cited by page in the text). Mitsui has been one of the largest Japanese conglomerates since the late nineteenth century.
9 As for the recognition of South Korea’s neocolonial status and anti-Americanism, see Lee, The Making of Minjung, 109–44.
10 For a significant English-language study on crossing the DMZ and its complicated performative effect, see Kim, DMZ Crossing.
13 As for the detailed circumstances around Yi’s wŏlbuk, I refer to Kim Chaeyong, “’Mŏnji’ ǔi munjesŏng,” 74–6.
14 To a close acquaintance disapproving of his sudden affiliation with a leftist organization, Hyŏn says that he and his like-minded friends were mostly passive men of the world under the Japanese colonial rule, having no clear stance or active action. After liberation, he wants to do some work, presumably, in relation to the construction of a new literature and culture, because it is the most urgent time of the nation. Yi T’aejun, “Before and After Liberation,” vol. 3, 45. An English translation of the entire text can be found in Park, On the Eve of the Uprising, 235–73.
15 For Yi T’aejun, the Soviet Union was “a total new world,” filled with “new lives of new people, new customs, and new cultures” and in which “the old and the evil of humankind all disappeared.” He asserts that Korea should emulate the fundamental reform of the Soviet Union in order to construct Korean people’s own new, righteous nation. In the travelogue, Yi expresses an unusually optimistic prospect for Korea’s future. Yi T’aejun, “Soryŏn kihaeng,” 4: 12, 51–52.
17 See ibid., 365. As an editor-in-chief of a newspaper, New People’s Daily, Yŏm Sangsŏp was arrested for “publishing editorials of an inflammatory nature intending to incite riot and civil disorder” with several other newspaper editors and publishers. G-2 Weekly Summary, No. 138.
18 Yŏm Sangsŏp, Hyop’’ung, 85, my emphasis.
21 For a recent significant English-language study on Yi T’aejun’s antiquarianism under Japanese colonial rule, see Poole, When the Future Disappears, 85–113.
23 Ibid., 339.
24 Ibid., 340.
25 A Korean literary scholar has pointed out the author’s subconscious thinking of Seoul as his home and political base. Chŏng, Chieguk ǔi kiŏk kwa chŏnyu, 169, 174–75.
27 Yi T’aejun, “Dust,” 381–2, my emphasis.
28 Ibid., 388.

Works cited


