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The development of detective fiction in Korea

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Introduction

Ever since the appearance of Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* (1841), which is inarguably considered the first detective story, detective fiction has continued to thrive. Not only has it become a genre that has been produced and consumed in many parts of the world, but we have also seen impressive developments within it, including the emergence of female detectives and film adaptations of some of the classics, such as the Sherlock Holmes series.1 Readers of detective fiction must be familiar with the conventional formula of the genre: a mysterious crime, usually a murder, is to be solved by a rational, intelligent, compassionate, and brave private detective. Despite this simple formula, both old detective novels and new detective novels fascinate us with the variety of themes that they deal with and the various locations and cultural contexts in which the central crimes occur. By turning our eyes to non-Western regions, such as Korea, this chapter examines how the global literary genre took on a new life in colonial Korea as a cultural means for writers and readers to express their desire for and discontent with the modernizing process.

Discussions of detective fiction have been active in the West ever since the publication of *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, starting with Baudelaire, who anticipated the era of literature that blends science and philosophy. Walter Benjamin approaches the figure of the detective as a *flâneur*, a bourgeois observer who seeks spectacles and yet hides from them at the same time.2 The genre has been historicized, theorized, and critiqued to a great extent in the English-speaking world; and the problem of modernity, to speak broadly, has been at the core of these discussions. As Todd Herzog rightly puts it, the genre shows the inextricable connection between “the traumas and pleasures of modern life” that manifests in crimes in urban settings.3 And the genre often reflects negative psychological effects of modern life, a literary expression of unfulfilled desires.4 Inasmuch as the detective is scrutinized under the lens of modernity, the criminal and their crime is also interrogated as a consequence of the modernizing process, mostly in Euro-American contexts, that affected social lives and psychology of people in the consumption-driven and alienated urban environment.

When the genre is explored in colonial contexts, the wealth of postcolonial studies provides us with useful theoretical tools for problematizing the construction of dangerous, murderous,
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and mysterious others—criminals or potential criminals—in detective fiction. The surge of the mysterious and potentially dangerous non-Western others in novels in Western Europe and America arose at the peak of imperial expansion and the spread of capitalism. In works that highlight crimes and mysteries such as *The Count of Monte Cristo* (1844) and *The Moonstone* (1868), readers would recall those marginalized, colonized, and suppressed characters in them. Scholarly engagement with the detective fiction in colonial and imperial contexts in the English-speaking world has been fairly abundant since the early 1990s, not only criticizing the Western obsession of “mastering others” but also calling attention to marginalized characters in this genre. The investigation of imperialism is also evident in the study of Japanese detective fiction: notably, Sari Kawana shows the nuanced ways that Japanese detective fiction criticized war ideologies even at a time of intense state censorship in the 1930s and 1940s.

It is, however, still rare to encounter discussions of the genre in formerly colonized worlds. Thus, this chapter aims to show how Korean detective fiction tells us about popular imaginations of modernity in a colonial situation. The genre arrived in Korea in the mid-1910s, appearing first in translations, and both translations and creative works were widely read in the 1930s. There was a clear recognition among readers and writers that the genre was foreign, mostly of British and French origins. And yet Korean detective fiction reveals a number of characteristics that direct us to see various issues and challenges that the colonized faced. I am paying special attention to the depictions of economic and geographical mobility, the figure of the femme fatale, and the theme of vengeance, which in turn reflect serious doubts over and limitations of the modernizing process in colonial Korea. While the mainstream “high literature” writers were gradually losing their readers due to the commercialization of as well as the increasing state control over the publishing industry, detective fiction (along with other popular fiction such as romance fiction and historical fiction) became popularized, filling in the literary imagination of modernity through the spectacle of money, violence, and sex.

The process of identifying the criminal produces suspense in detective fiction; however, the fundamental question to be raised is not the identity of the criminal “but how a self-justifying, self-sustaining social system comes to be threatened not by some external disorder but by an internal infection of crime.” This observation refers to Europe and the US’s own internal problems that derived from their systems and ideologies, including imperialism, but it helps us to see how Korean writers identified the widening gap between reality and colonial ideologies in their own society—namely the fissure of modernity through defamiliarizing the familiar. The infectious and murderous others are in fact the familiar: Koreans who now pose threats to fellow Koreans, monsters that are born in and through social systems that seriously endanger the social fabric of the colony and that even pose threats to the colonizer. The genre reveals the uncertainty of modernity in extreme through the ambiguous identity of the criminal, both chic and primitive, familiar and unfamiliar, fearful and fascinating, and treacherous and dependable. In the shadow of a glamorous urban lifestyle and modern technologies, and under the imperial propaganda of pan-Asianism, the detective and the criminal direct us to see stunning affairs such as car chases, gun fights, bank robberies, and, of course, gruesome murders that we hardly see in any other literary works that were produced during the colonial period.

Locating detective fiction in modern Korean literature

A Korean translation of the term *detective novel* first appeared in 1908, when *The Twin Flute* (*Ssangokjŏk*) by Yi Haejo (1869–1927) was published with the headline title *chŏng’um sosŏl*. *The Twin Flute* is a story of two police officers and a private female detective chasing after criminals,
though the role of the detective is not significant. Although Yi Haejo is largely known to us for his enlightenment novels, didactic novels that envision national progress with an emphasis on gender and class equality and on education, he stood out from his peers at the time because of his experiments with various literary genres. He translated Émile Gaboriau’s crime mystery novel *L’Affaire Lerouge* (1866) in 1913 and probably wrote another *chŏngtam sosŏl*, *A Bat Umbrella* (*pakjwi usan*), in 1920, though these works did not gain much interest from readers. Due to Yi’s publication of the translation and his two creative novels, some deem Yi Haejo as the first detective fiction writer in Korea.8 This view is not widely accepted in the detective fiction scholarship in Korea, but the debates on Yi Haejo’s translation and creative novels indicate two things that are important to consider when discussing the genre in colonial Korea: translation practices and the publishing industry.

First, there was no clear idea as to what constitutes detective fiction at the time, due to the influx of a variety of foreign works at the turn of the century, mostly from Japan, that dealt with crimes and mysteries. In the mid-1910s, Korean translations of British novels and French novels—more specifically, sensational fiction and adventure fiction—were called *chŏngtam sosŏl*.9 In these works, the role of the detective is insignificant, or sometimes the detective doesn’t appear at all. The naming of the genre as detective fiction had to do with the borrowing of intermediary texts that were mostly translated by Kuroiwa Ruikō (1862–1920). Ruikō was known as a detective fiction translator, and Korean translators relied heavily on Ruikō’s texts. Nonetheless, the two terms, *chŏngtam sosŏl* and *t’amyŏng sosŏl* were used interchangeably until the late 1920s, though the latter did not arrive in Korea until the mid-1910s.10 Further, we cannot dismiss the fact that someone like Yi Haejo experimented with the genre through combining his previous exposure to traditional mystery novels and courtroom novels (*songsa sosŏl*) with his newly acquired knowledge about crime fictions from the West. In short, the diachronic and synchronic intertextuality of Korean detective fiction must be scrutinized in the colonial context rather than applying a conventionally defined understanding of the genre.

Second, and in line with the first, *A Bat Umbrella* was published in the relatively relaxed cultural environment after the March First Movement in 1919, when the publishing industry introduced various literary genres in translations to appeal to native readership. This was when the Sherlock Holmes series was introduced to Korean readers by Kim Tongsŏng (1890–1969), who had taken an unusual translation route at the time, translating the series directly from English rather than from Japanese.11 Nonetheless, detective fiction, especially translations produced in the “cultural rule” period, were crucial in spreading the idea of the genre widely among writers and readers. And the diversification of genres and the increased number of translated works indicate competition among domestic publishers, who were catering to the newly educated readers. From the early 1920s, there was a significant increase in detective fiction, penned by Eden Phillpotts, Arthur Conan Doyle, Maurice Leblanc, Fortuné du Boisgobey, Émile Gaboriau, S.S.Van Dine, and more. Although Korean writers were reluctant to write creative detective fiction, they played a crucial role in translating these works, notably the following translators: Pang Chŏnhwan, Kim Naeŏng, Pak T’aewŏn, Pang In’gŭn, Yi Sŏkhun, Kim Yuŏng, An Hoenam, to name a few.12

Pang Chŏnhwan (1899–1931) is known to us as a writer of children’s literature—he also wrote two creative detective novels for children in the mid-1920s13—but the production of creative detective fiction for the general public did not begin until the mid-1930s. There are a couple of reasons for this delayed appearance. First, the competition among newspapers and magazines became fierce in the mid-1930s, and sensational materials in the form of news, journalistic essays, and literature flooded the industry. This trend affected the literary world, and the print media actively sought writers who could produce detective fiction for newspapers and
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magazines. Second, the state censorship on proletarian literature and literary works that contained politically sensitive matters was intensified at the time, posing severe limits on writers. As a result, many writers were put under economic deprivation, and some of them negotiated their reality by producing “popular literature” (taeijing sosŏl).

Ch’ae Mansik’s (1902–50) satirical and self-defeating description in his detective novel, Beautiful Demon (Yŏmma, 1934), gives us a lucid description of the writing environment. In the novel, a dandy detective with an adventurous spirit recommends that his writer friend produce detective fiction to gain popularity. The friend, however, protests the idea, saying that “detective fiction, popular fiction, or fiction that deal with class struggle are not literature proper. These are suitable for writers who are desperate to make money or those who fell behind the literary world. These losers have no other choice but to hang on to such things.”14 Ch’ae’s Beautiful Demon; (Yŏmma) was the first creative detective novel that was serialized in Chosŏn Daily (Chosŏn ilbo). By indirectly calling himself a “loser,” Ch’ae not only reveals the general writing environment of the time but also indicates the divided opinions on detective fiction in the mainstream literary scene.

Kim Yujŏng (1908–37), for example, translated S. S. Van Dine’s The Benson Murder Case (1916) to pay his medical bills,15 believing that detective fiction would sell quickly since it was one of the most popular genres for publishers to print at the time.16 Kim Tongin, a champion of pure literature, serialized a detective novel, Beyond the Horizon (Sup’yŏngŏn nŭmŏro, 1934) in The Daily News (Maeil sinbo) and later defended his position by saying that he was writing anything just to make ends meet at the time,17 reflecting writers’ ambivalent and, at times, condescending attitude to the genre. A literary critic, Paek Ch’ŏl (1908–85), perceived detective fiction that catered to the general public as lacking literary sensibility.18 Kim Namchŏn (1911–53) was harsher than Paek, stating that some writers “shamed” themselves by producing popular novels. Upon observing the literary scene in the late 1930s, when romance fiction (t’ongsok sosŏl), detective fiction (t’ammŏng sosŏl), film fiction (yŏnghua sosŏl), and historical fiction (yadam sosŏl) were gaining popularity, Kim Namchŏn lamented that it was hard to find any more novels that could be called pure literature. Those who turned their backs on pure literature, as included by Kim, are Han Yongun, Pak T’aewŏn, and Yi T’aejun: they “insulted literature and trampled art,” Kim argued.20

Writers’ and critics’ divided opinions on the genre in colonial Korea, however, went beyond the question of what literature was or had to be: they also displayed their serious concerns over redefining “the masses” (taeijing) and ways for Korean literature to serve them. Some writers, even those who were known to be writers of pure literature, welcomed the genre, as they had a broader understanding of literary readership. A modernist writer, Yi Chongmyŏng, was one of them; he stated that detective fiction has the merit of reaching the general public, since it requires basic scientific knowledge from readers rather than artistic knowledge and sensibility.21 The deployment of scientific knowledge in the genre was emphasized by others as well: they believed that knowledge about law and medical science in particular would help readers to become intellectually mature.22

Overall, most writers and critics in the mainstream literature were hesitant to tag the genre as an art (yesul). And Kim Naesŏng (1909–57) was one of a few who fiercely defended detective fiction as literature proper at the time. In fact, Kim is an important figure in modern Korean literature who has been underrepresented in South Korea until recently. Since his literary debut as a detective fiction writer in Japan in 1935 with a short mystery story, “An Oval Mirror” (Daenkei no kagami),23 Kim closely followed the literary trends in Japan and produced works that could be categorized in two groups: honkaku (ponkyŏk, orthodox), the conventionally known detective fiction such as the Sherlock Holmes series and the Dupin series, and henkaku (pyŏnkkyŏk, orthodox),...
deviant), detective fiction where mysteries are coated with high doses of eroticism and bizarre-ness. The heated debates between these two divided groups over the definition of the genre in Japan did not affect Korean detective fiction much, but Kim was clearly aware of the divided views on the genre in Japan, and he experimented with both.

Ever since Kim Naesŏng ceased to write detective fiction from the mid-1940s, no notable detective/mystery writers gained popularity among readers.24 One exception is Kim Sŏngjong (1941–), who has been enjoying stable popularity since the mid-1970s, though his works are rarely discussed in academia. Detective fiction remained on the margin in the literary scholarship until the late 1990s. The strong anticolonial atmosphere in South Korea contributed to the genre’s marginalization; thus, writers like Kim Naesŏng, who continued writing during the Asia–Pacific War, was forgotten for a long time. Further, detective fiction and romance fiction, which have been put under the vague category of “popular novels,” did not gain interest from literary critics and historians, who considered them inferior for their conventional style, form, and content.25 From the late 1990s, the deconstruction of the dichotomy of “pure” and “popular” art and literature began. The deconstruction process has been another factor behind the new scholarly attention to this genre and its writers. Currently, the study of detective fiction is concentrated on a few writers, notably Kim Naesŏng, and on the colonial period. Going forward, it will be important to contextualize the genre from a broader perspective, encompassing works that are distinguishable for their handling of mysteries and crimes, and to interrogate the Japan connection on the development of the genre. In addition, we need to expand our scholarly engagement on the history of the genre by examining works that have been produced in postwar Korea(s).

In sum, the transnational flow of the literary genre to colonial Korea was by no means uninterrupted or smooth, and the complex development of the genre requires close attention to translation practices and cultural circumstances of the time when detective fiction was produced and consumed. While detailed textual analysis is a task beyond this chapter, I will briefly introduce some of the features of Korean detective fiction in the following section, in particular the urban setting and figures of criminals and detectives.

The criminal and the detective in the city

Detective fiction was highly popular in 1920s and 1930s Japan. It was closely associated with the ero-guro-nansensu phenomenon, which is known for expressions of the deviant, the bizarre, and the ridiculous in popular cultural forms such as novels, manga, film, and music.26 The deployment of the ero and guro in detective fiction is known to be a cultural response to the public’s obsession with knowing others in the increasingly urbanized environment, where unknowable/unpredictable others and things produced fear and anxiety in people. Detective fiction, as Sari Kawana argues, transformed “the obsession and fear into consumable entertainment” for the people of Tokyo.27 Having been relatively free from the burden of demonstrating a cultural identity, the genre represents the grayness of Japanese modernity at best; its works were perceived as a form of “antidotes to the modern epidemics of angst and anxiety”28 that had grown out of the Japanese enlightenment project since the Meiji period.

The idea of civilizing and enlightening the society (munmyŏn kaehwa) was fervently promoted in Korea even before Japan’s annexation of Korea, and it was an ideological sinew of the colonial state in ruling the colony. Railroads were built, electricity lit the streets of cities, and schools were established by the state. And yet the imbalanced colonial development was becoming more noticeable as time went by. The places in Kyŏngsŏng (hereafter Seoul) that appear most frequently in detective fiction, and thus are the most developed areas, are only a handful:
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the Myŏngch’ijŏng (Myŏngdong), Namdaemun, and Kwanghwamun areas, as well as Seoul Station. And these areas are described as highly developed and full of people, most of whom are nonnatives of Seoul: most of them came from rural areas to the city in search of jobs. Criminals are hidden in crowded spaces in Seoul such as “ap’at’ŭ” town, where even detectives have difficulty distinguishing one house from another because of their uniform structure.29

As literary works produced at the time demonstrate, the economic gap between Seoul and rural areas was vast, and even in Seoul, portrayals of unfortunate people are countless. By the mid-1930s, the economic deprivation that people were experiencing was more than alarming: there was a high unemployment rate, reckless speculation on gold mining, a series of labor and farm disputes, and so on. The “gold rush” in the 1930s aptly sums up the economic situation at the time: it led many Koreans to bankruptcy, including some well-known writers, such as Ch’ae Mansik.30 The economic condition would only get worse in the late 1930s as the Asia–Pacific War ensued.

Strangely, however, the bourgeois culture and lifestyle were highlighted ever more in media at the time, in which the possession of modern-style houses, called munhwa chut’aek; ownership of Ford and Chevrolet cars; and frequenting department stores and cafés were all presented as signs of the status of urban bourgeoisie. Journalists exaggerated the “fad” of the modern lifestyle, often blaming the scientific developments behind the dizzying effects of modernity for encouraging people to seek strange things. One commercial magazine stated that the rapid and intense progress brought on by modern science was numbing people’s minds, arguing that this was the very reason why people flocked to bizarre (yŏpkkiri) things that were overtly erotic, grotesque, and mythical.31 While the media’s presentation of Seoul as a consumer-driven society was exaggerated, it could also point to the precariousness of a situation where readers sought a space of escape through consuming fantasy-like stories that were far from their real lives.

Major newspapers and cultural magazines played their role in feeding the desire. It may not be a coincidence that The Daily News began serializing Kim Tongin’s Beyond the Horizon about two months after Chosŏn Daily launched the serialization of Ch’ae Mansik’s Beautiful Demon. The two newspapers, one is controlled directly by the colonial government and the other is run by a Korean entrepreneur, were competing against one another to boost sales. Chosŏn Daily facilitated the detective fiction genre actively beyond the newspaper. It is in the children’s magazine established by Chosŏn Daily, Sonyŏn (Youth), where Kim Naesŏng wrote his first detective fiction in Korean, White Mask (Paekkamyŏn, 1937). And Kim’s fiction works appeared in numerous magazines and newspapers in the late 1930s, including Chokwang, Munjang, Nongŏp Chosŏn, Chosŏn Daily, Maeil sinbo, and Tonga Daily. Many works of detective fiction in major newspapers and magazines feature stories of educated, wealthy, and beautiful people in Seoul; yet by no means are the stories of poor and unfortunate people in the city and in rural areas invisible in them. One can detect the uneven capitalist development in the Japanese Empire through a close reading of each story, particularly descriptions of the deprived condition of rural communities, working people in the city, the migration of Japanese and Korean people to Manchuria and Shanghai, and so on.

The wide range of imbalances in the colony raises the question of the authenticity of the Japanese-led enlightenment project in colonial Korea. As seen in most detective and crime fiction as the dominant theme, the ideology of colonial development was failing many, and Seoul, as some writers observed, was “a city of devils” that breeds all the nastiest crimes.32 Kawana’s metaphor of the “antidotes” perhaps also explains the consumption of detective fiction in colonial Korea, but there seems to be a psychological layer that can be added to the “modern epidemics of angst and anxiety,” namely the desire for the social and capital mobility that were not given to the colonized. The detective and the criminal are not affected by financial or
geographical limits: they drive foreign cars for a chase, travel freely in and out of the peninsula, and even attend high society’s masked balls.

The detective Paek Yongho in Ch’ae Mansik’s Beautiful Demon, for example, possesses a modern-style house in Seoul, an imported car, and wealth. His detective work is just a hobby. The famous detective in Kim Naesŏng’s works, Yu Pullan, is also mobile: he is wealthy enough to travel overseas for pleasure. The potentially high-profile Korean independence fighter Sŏ Injun in Kim Tongin’s Beyond the Horizon was educated in the West, holding a PhD in criminology. Sŏ possesses various skills, including the ability to pilot a plane when escaping from the peninsula. These detectives’ free movement in and out of the peninsula is something that was almost impossible for most Koreans at the time, and their mobility signifies the desire for the bodily and economic freedom that people lacked.

Besides their economically comfortable backgrounds, these characters have some other commonalities: they possess rationality and superior intelligence, and they emphasize personal integrity, absolute individualism, and stoic control of their emotions. These features are a combination of detectives in British novel and American novels. And yet Korean detectives tend to be more emotional rather than rational, especially vulnerable to beautiful women who are criminals or the cause for crimes. Being vulnerable to women is also a characteristic of American detective fiction, but in the Korean context, the women, criminals in particular, speak to the media exploitation of educated women in cities. These female criminals are kind of an evil version of the modern girl: they are educated, beautiful, driven by consumption, and bold in expressing their sexual desire, as was often sensationalized in public media at the time. Not only did the detectives provide vicarious satisfaction to readers through their economic and physical freedom, but the erotic and dangerous femme fatale—often criminals—provided an erotic fantasy to readers as well, by exploiting the image of the modern girl.

Male detectives are tested and seduced by the femme fatale but overcome the temptation, demonstrating their self-control. The significant function of the femme fatale to test the hero is perhaps distinctively American since she, by failing to seduce the hero, ultimately proves his ability to control his emotions. In a number of Korean detective fiction works, the femme fatale not only functions to prove the hero’s control over himself but also enhances patriarchy since she is often contrasted with another woman—dependent, powerless, domestic, and obedient—who has no one to turn to but the hero for protection and who eventually wins the hero’s heart. The stark contrast between these two types of modern girls, one fatal but strong and the other obedient and vulnerable, can be paralleled to the common appearance of a “bad woman” and a “good woman” in Western detective fiction, but the modern girl in colonial Korea also indicates how this popular image of women embodies the anxiety over the uneven and unstable development of colonial capitalism that was often expressed from men’s point of view. Korean male detectives’ full control of resources and sexual desire can therefore be interpreted as a remedy to the anxiety felt by male writers whose dichotomized description of the modern girl may point to their desire and imagination to overcome colonial modernity. The conventional figures of the detective and the femme fatale in the colonial situation, in other words, must take account of the interplay between colonized men’s reduced control of material resources and patriarchy and their imagination of their “reclaiming” control. And yet we also need to consider the commercial exploitation of female sexuality in colonial Korea and the expansion of a voyeuristic gaze, at times in the name of “observation,” that capitalizes on female bodies and pathologizes female psychology.

The absence or reduced authority of the colonial state is an important feature of detective fiction. This was a distinctive feature in the translation of sensational or adventure novels starting from the 1910s. Undermining authority, especially law enforcement, is a “license” to escape from
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institutional constraints for detective fiction writers. The possibility to bypass the state authority and to describe the constraints that colonized men had to face would quickly diminish at the end of the 1930s; around this time, the free, liberal, cynical detectives turned into military spies whose possession of scientific knowledge and rationality would be their ultimate weapon. The short timespan for the existence of the detective fiction genre, in other words, has to do with the growing severity of censorship as the Asia–Pacific War and World War II progressed. Whereas detective fiction questioned the blind faith in science in Japan at the time,35 it went along with the Japanese military ideology, the New Order (shin taisei),36 catching spies and obtaining technologies that threatened the Japanese military operations overseas. The detective before the New Order did not travel outside the peninsula, though they were a cosmopolitan. In the 1940s, their world expanded, crossing geographical boundaries more freely than ever.

It would be a mistake, however, to view the detectives merely as the pro-Japanese collaborators during wartime. In a number of works produced in the extremely challenging cultural environments in colonial Korea due to the tightened censorship and the intensely militaristic governing policies, we witness works that can be read as potentially rebellious or subversive. As the freedoms for writers were reduced significantly, their literary imagination of the colonial reality expanded in which the criticism of Japanese imperialism is implicitly expressed through ideologically ambiguous subplot and appropriations of original texts in translations, to name a few. This paradox of freedom in the literary production in colonial Korea must be approached carefully, and I briefly discuss two works that stand as a strong case to support the paradox. One work is a Korean translation of Alexandre Dumas’s The Count of Monte Cristo that was serialized in The Daily News (1916–17) during the “military rule” period; and the other is Kim Naesŏng’s Typhoon (T’aep’ung), also serialized in The Daily News during the war.

The Korean translation of The Count, titled Neptune (Haewangsŏng), is dramatically different from the original and the Japanese intermediary text, although the translator, Yi Sanghyŏp, kept the overall plot intact. Yi reconstructed the mid-nineteenth-century European background into the turn of the twentieth-century East Asian and replaced the French hero with a Chinese one. In it, the sympathetic gaze on the colonized Vietnam is too obvious to miss for the recently colonized readers of the Korean translation, and the hero’s personal acts of revenge add a layer of ambiguity to the vengeance since the villains have histories of betraying their nation.37 A subplot in Kim Naesong’s Typhoon also shows an ambiguity of the pan-Asian ideology: one of the main characters is kidnapped by Americans and is put to work on a fishing vessel like a slave. Later on, he is sold and transferred to a remote island in Southeast Asia, where an immoral hunting fanatic, the British governor of India, makes use of him as human prey to be hunted. Miraculously escaping from the island by killing the governor, the character returns to the Korean Peninsula to take vengeance on those who wronged him.

One cannot help but notice, however, the testimony of the Western imperialism in Typhoon evokes Japan’s exploitation of Korea. For example, one of the protagonists encounters people who were taken by force from colonized worlds to the island: Indians, Africans, and the Indigenous people from what is now the United States, among others, are placed there as human prey to be hunted down. In the eyes of the colonial state, however, he becomes living proof of the brutality of the Western imperialists: an ironic fiction about imperialism that was officially approved by the colonial state. In sum, detailed readings of detective fiction such as these two novels present polysemic potentials of the genre beyond the simple promotion of the war ideology. These potentials can be further examined from a comparative perspective, investigating the genre produced in formerly colonized worlds side by side and by scrutinizing the cultural environments in which the potentials were created through writers’ negotiation of reality at aesthetic, political, and cultural levels.
Conclusion

One of the representative writers of detective fiction, Kim Naesông, stated that the genre did not really strike root in Korea despite readers’ high enthusiasm. This observation, which was made in the mid-1950s, may have been grounded in his witnessing of the long discontinuity of the genre between the liberation and the mid-1950s as well as the scarce number of writers of detective fiction since the colonial time. While further discussion of the localization of Western literary genres in colonial Korea deserves substantial scholarly attention elsewhere, I point out here that Kim’s observation dismisses an important condition for the localization of the genre: the consumption of translated fiction works. We must take account of the translation process by which styles and narrative structure, not to mention the content of the original texts, were modified to meet domestic needs. Nonetheless, if we apply the definition of the genre by Western and Japanese standards like critics in colonial Korea did, the first “orthodox” detective fiction could be Kim Naesông’s The Devil (Main), which was published in 1939. If we broaden the concept of the genre by using ch’uri sosŏl, a term that has been used more widely since the Korean War, the number of detective fiction works would increase tremendously. Yŏm Sangŏp, for example, is another writer whose detective/mystery-like narratives await further academic attention. In short, the discussion of detective fiction in colonial Korea cannot bypass the translation practices and the cultural environment of the time that localized the global literary genre.

While it is beyond the scope of this current chapter to provide detailed textual analyses, I have discussed some of the key characteristics in the detective fiction of colonial Korea: spatial implications of Seoul, the bourgeois male detective, the femme fatale criminal, and the ambiguity of colonialist ideology. As a highly developed metropolis in the Japanese Empire, Seoul reveals its dual face: a glamorous city enjoyed by the bourgeoisie and a “city of devils” where criminals flock from everywhere. The duality indeed is also reflected in the figure of the male detective, who is rational and emotional at the same time, as this chapter briefly touches on, and who is simultaneously an agent of the empire and a free individual detached from any institutional connections. Kim Tongin’s portrayal of two Korean detectives in Beyond the Horizon and Kim Naesông’s Yu Pullan in The Devil and Typhoon speak to the latter, and this dual character and these functions of the detective can be explored further to elaborate on the detecting agency in colonial situations.

In detective fiction, female characters are flat compared to male characters: they are either sexy, greedy, and dangerous beasts or vulnerable, submissive, and powerless angels in need of protection from the detective. Although the binary description of female characters may appear simplistic, there are pressing social issues to be explored further, such as the process by which these characters turn evil or angelic. We also need to consider the possibility that the figure of the femme fatale may have been a reflection of desires from both male and female readers: the voyeuristic gaze for the former and the desire to be free from social controls for the latter.

Notes

1 Numerous works by Agatha Christie and Raymond Chandler have been adapted into film and television series. Contemporary female detective fiction writers such as Sue Grafton, Sara Paretsky, and Patricia Cornwell have been enjoying high popularity beyond the US border. Female detectives in works by Paretsky and Natsuo Kirino have been received with enthusiasm among readers as well.
3 Herzog, Crime Stories, 20.
4 Zizek, Looking Awry, 9–38.
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6 Kawana, Murder Most Modern.
7 Crooks, “Reopening the Mysteries,” 218.
9 The colonial newspaper Maeil sinbo (The Daily News)’s serialization of Yi Sanghyŏp’s (1893–1957) translation of Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s (1837–1915) Diavola, titled A Virtuous Woman’s Ressentiment (Chŏngbingwŏn, 1914–15), belongs to the former category; the same translator’s adaptation of Alexandre Dumas’s (1802–70) The Count of Monte Cristo (1845–6), titled Neptune (Haerangwŏng, 1916–17), belongs to the latter. For details about these serials of these two novels, see Hŏ, The Novel in Transition; Cho Sŏngmyŏn, Han’guk kundae taegung sosŏl pip’yŏngnon.
10 Ch’oe Aesun, “Singminji sigi t’amjŏng sosŏl ŭi ponyŏk kwa suyong wysang mit changp’yŏn pŏnyŏk t’anmjŏng sosŏl yŏn’gu,” 503.
11 For details about Kim Tongsŏng and this particular translation, see Pak Chinyŏng, “Ch’ŏlligu Kim Tongsŏng kwa Syŏllok homsŭ pŏnyŏk ŭi yŏksa,” 277–317.
12 See the list of translated detective fiction in O Hyejin, “1930 nyŏndae han’guk ch’uri sosŏl yŏn’gu,” 206–9.
13 A Secret of the Double Seven (Ch’ilch’iltan ŭi pilim) and In Search of My Brother (Tongsaeng ŭl ch’aj’ŏrŏ) between 1925 and 1927.
14 Ch’a Mansik, “Yŏnma.”
16 See Kim’s letter to his friend An Hoenam, in which he asks An to send him a couple of “very interesting and popular” detective fictions to translate. Cited in Chŏn Ponggwan, Huanggūmgwang sidae, 473–74.
17 Cited in Ch’a Hyeyŏng, “Hŭigwi chaptchiro pon han’guk munhaksŏ,” 77.
19 It is difficult to define yadam. Stories of historical events and people from Chosŏn period, that are “imbued with an air of historical veracity” are called yadam in contemporary scholarship. Si Nae Park, xviii. However, yadam was used interchangeably with kodam (old stories), koedam (ghost stories), or kidam (bizarre stories) in the 1930s.
21 Yi Chongmyŏng, “T’anmjŏng munye so.”
22 Song Injŏng, “T’anmjŏng sosŏl sŏgo” [Rethinking Detective Fiction], cited in Cho Sŏngmyŏn, Han’guk kundae taegung sosŏl pip’yŏngnon, 129.
23 Kim, “Daenkei no kagami,” 32–51. It was translated into Korean and published in colonial Korea in 1936. This piece has long been regarded as the first detective story written by a Korean writer in Japanese, but Yu Jaemin discovered that Kim Samgyu’s detective fiction “A scalpel on the stake” [Kui ni tatsu, November 1929–March 1930, Chŏn Ponggwan, 473–74].
24 In the postwar period, Kim wrote mainly romance fiction.
27 Kawana, Murder Most Modern, 30–1.
28 Ibid., 8.
29 This description comes from Ch’aé Mansik’s Beautiful Demon. Ap’at’i means “apartment” but it refers to a district where low-rise rental houses, not high-rise residential buildings, were built with uniform structure by combining Western and traditional architectural styles from 1930. The term appears in a number of novels in late colonial Korea, including Kim Naesŏng’s The Devil. For details about literary representation of apartments in late colonial Korea, see Chŏn Chuhŭi, “Kundaegŏk chugŏ konggga kwa chip ŭi ssag.”
30 For details on the social and cultural response to the 1930s colonial economy, see Chŏn’s Huanggūmgwang sidae.
32 Pang In’gŭn, Mado ŭi hyangppiul.
34 Ibid.
35 Kawana, Murder Most Modern, 124.
36 Sin taisei refers to the wartime reform promulgated and carried out by the Kishi cabinet starting in 1940, which aimed to reorder Japanese society, such as uniting all political parties under one state party, emphasizing nationalism, forcing industries to prioritize and serve the state interests, and so on. Imperial subjects, including the colonized Koreans and Taiwanese, were expected to serve military imperialists and serve the state interests.

37 The Japanese intermediary text is faithful to the French original in plot and geographical background except for the changing of names in Japanese. However, in Yi’s translation, although the overall plot did not change, the geographical background and names have all been altered. Instead of a European background, characters are drawn from China, Japan, and Vietnam. This kind of translation, which is commonly referred to as adaptation (pōnan), was a common translation practice at the time. For details on the Korean translation of The Count of Monte Cristo, see Rhee, The Novel in Transition, 153–80.

38 Kim stated that there were “no” detective fiction writers during the time, despite the high demand of it. For details of his brief sketch of the development of detective fiction in the West, Japan, and Korea, see his essay “T’amjŏng sosŏlloon” [A Discussion on Detective Fiction], reprinted in Cho Sŏngmyŏn, Han’guk kündae taejung sosŏl pip’yŏngnon, 169–77. It was originally published in a journal Saebyŏk in May 1956.

39 An Hoenam, “Kim Naesŏng chŏ Main.” However, as I noted earlier, the first detective fiction was published between 1929 and 1930 in colonial Korea, which was written by Kim Samgyu in the colonial administration–established magazine Chŏsen chihō gyōsei [Administration of Local Areas in Korea].

40 The term ch’uri sosŏl was not used at all during the colonial Korea. It encompasses fiction that deals with mysteries, including murder mysteries (detective fictions).

Works cited


Detective fiction in Korea


Yi Chŏngmyŏng. “Tam’ŏng munye sŏgo” [Rethinking the Art of Detective Fiction]. Chunchuoe ilbo, June 5–9, 1928.


