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The sonic unconscious and the wartime radio novel in colonial Korea

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With the opening of the Kyŏngsŏng Broadcast Corporation (KBC) under the call sign JODK in February 1927 in Kyŏngsŏng (current day Seoul), Koreans began to hear sound in whole new ways, altering their sense of perception.¹ In Walter Benjamin’s famous essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” he states:

> During the long periods of history, the mode of human sense perception changes with humanity’s entire mode of existence. The manner in which human sense perception is organized, the medium in which it is accomplished, is determined not only by nature but by historical circumstances as well.²

In this essay, Benjamin uses film as one of the primary examples of new modes of cultural production that have transformed human perception. He goes further by stating that the “camera introduces us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses.”³ What he means by “unconscious optics” is the camera’s ability to “render more precise what in any case was visible though unclear: it reveals entirely new structural formations of the subject.”⁴ He gives examples such as the close-up, enlargement of a snapshot, and slow motion as having the power to change human perception, thereby effectively altering humans’ behavior and interactions with the subject, each other, and society. Although Benjamin’s analysis refers to the mechanical reproduction of visual media, we can extrapolate beyond the visual (photography and film) to the aural and oral and thus include sound technologies that have implications for changing human sensory perceptions by bringing to the fore that which had been deemed unconscious and unheard. In this vein, Benjamin had a keen interest in the materialist and formalist aspects of radio. He directly participated in the production aspects (directing programs, narrating or announcing his own script) of radio and in penning a number of texts about and for the radio, especially as he witnessed the rise of Nazism and fascism in Germany.⁵ In his “Reflection on Radio” and other writings, Benjamin emphasizes radio’s potential for two-way or mutual communication between producers and listeners rather than the traditional approach to radio as merely an instrument for propaganda and education.⁶ It is through this dialectical
relationship, which I call the sonic unconscious, derived from Benjamin's optical unconscious, that I propose to read sonic narratives in modern Korea.

With the linguistic turn in the 1960s and the pictorial turn in the twenty-first century in literary and media analysis, texts are often made to be inscribed and read rather than voiced or listened to. However, as Jonathan Sterne succinctly puts it, sound is just as enduring an “artifact of the messy and political human sphere,” through which we can hear new stories, explore new ways of understanding texts, and seek new methodologies. In this chapter, I seek to draw attention to listening in order to shed new light on modern Korean literature. I will take up radio to reassess modern Korean literary history and the materiality of sound technologies. Radio was one among the many new, important sound technologies that became available in Korea in the twentieth century. By tracing an instance of history, culture, and technology of sound broadcasting and the programs produced, I hope to work toward a new understanding of modern Korean literary production and also toward a potential methodology for analyzing intermedial texts.

Sound has been an undeniable aspect of both oral and written literatures in modern Korea, although it has often been overlooked in textual studies. Walter Ong claims in his *Orality and Literacy* that the “present-day high-technology culture, in which a new orality is sustained by telephone, radio, and television, and other electronic devices that depend for their existence and functioning on writing and print,” developed the difference between orality and literacy. This he calls secondary orality, which coexists with literacy but also is a new form of oral culture. In other words, electronic devices such as radio and television create a space for “more deliberate and self-conscious” orality. Although Ong focuses on the conscious aspect of production and Benjamin underscores the unconscious nature of reception, underlying both their ideas are the significant ways new media technologies enable or mediate our human senses to know beyond what we would otherwise know with our bare eyes or ears.

Keeping Benjamin’s and Ong’s points about the relationship between sound and written texts in mind, I analyze in this chapter the Korean *pangsong sosŏl* (radio novels) produced during the early 1940s, the turbulent period when much of the northern hemisphere was embroiled in the conflict that escalated into World War II and when Korea was inalienably entangled in Imperial Japan’s war mobilization. I read Kim Tŏngin’s (1900–51) radio novel “Namgyŏngjoyak” (“Nanjing Treaty,” 1943), one of the works collected in the anthology *Pangsong sosŏl myŏngjaksŏn* (*Masterworks of Korean Radio Novels*), to highlight features of late-colonial-period Korean literature that might have been neglected or overlooked due to inattention to the sonic element. By tracing the trajectory of Kim’s career from writing historical fiction to publishing the *Yadam* magazine and authoring radio novels, I aim to shed light on the production and reception of sonic narratives as well as new narrative techniques made possible through the intermedial encounter between print and radio during the period of Japanese total war mobilization (1938–45).

**Colonial Korean radio and radio novels**

Mass media, including film, radio, and of course print, played a pivotal role in encouraging, if not coercing, Koreans to participate in the Japanese colonialist project, especially after *bunka seiji* (cultural policy) was set into motion in response to the March First Movement, or Independence Movement, by the Japanese government-general of Korea (GGK hereafter). Colonial Korean media grew rapidly not only in numbers but also in content and coverage. By the late 1930s, after Japan’s invasion of China in 1937 initiated the Second Sino-Japanese War and the eventual fall of major Chinese cities such as Shanghai and Nanjing in 1938, mass media became an even more important vehicle for Japanese Empire building and total war mobilization.
Therefore, on the one hand, stricter censorship and control were placed on print media, eventually leading to the closing of the two major Korean-owned vernacular newspapers, the Chosŏn ilbo and the Tonga ilbo in August 1940. On the other hand, radio broadcasting on KBC’s channel 2 (che 2 pangsong)—which exclusively aired Korean-language programs—continued to operate on a daily basis until 1942, when it was once again merged with channel 1 and then eliminated altogether in 1944. The function and consumption of radio varied, but undoubtedly, the colonial government held a tight grip over radio broadcasting, just as it had with other media productions, such as film and print. For example, starting in September 1939, radio broadcasting, amplified through public speakers, was used to announce the time for emperor worship. After hearing the blaring siren, all Japanese subjects, which included Koreans, were obligated to stop and bow toward the emperor for an entire one minute, after which radio broadcasting continued with other programs. In another case, the Korean-language radio broadcasts were actively used to recruit “volunteers” for the Japanese military. Informational meetings, lectures, and stories of bravery were broadcasted especially outside of Seoul through regional stations in P’yŏngyang, Ch’ŏngjin, Pusan, Taegu, and others in order to enlist young men. To be sure, radio broadcasting served as a practical and powerful apparatus for promoting the colonial state’s naisen ittai (K: naesŏn ilch’ŏe) campaign (Japan and Korea as one body) campaign and the Kominka (K: hwangminhwa) Movement (Imperial Subject Movement). Radio programming mattered for the purpose of enforcing imperial belonging.

Yet as Michael Robinson’s work on radio in colonial Korea showed, attempts at cementing Japanese cultural hegemony through radio technology and programming were often undermined by Korean consumers who demanded otherwise. In fact, Kyŏngsŏng station 2, largely funded by Nippon Hōsō Kyōkai (NHK) in Japan, began in 1933 in response to Korean listeners’ demand for more Korean-language programs. In this respect, it is highly likely that during the early years of radio, Korean listeners did not always fall victim to the system of control or assimilation strategies.

Although listening to music through the radio was a popular activity, listening to radio dramas was just as, or even more, popular with audiences. One of the first radio dramas to be aired on JODK was a performance of Henrik Ibsen’s A Doll’s House in 1927, produced by the newly formed Radio Drama Research Group (radio kŭk yŏn’guhoe). This was followed by a number of other theatrical plays (both foreign and Korean) translated and adapted for the radio, including Shakespeare’s The Merchant of Venice, the Korean classic The Tale of Ch’unhyang, and Tolstoy’s Resurrection. During the early years of radio broadcasting, as expected, many of the materials were adapted from already-existing plays and prose fiction. Furthermore, these texts were usually significantly abbreviated or excerpted to fit into one programming slot. Although radio drama was a popular genre among listeners, it was also one of the most frustrating programs for most of the audience to tune into because during the early years with only one station, the program constantly shifted back and forth between Japanese and Korean languages. It wasn’t until the mid-1930s with the opening of an all-Korean language station that original Korean radio dramas were more frequently written by professional writers such as Yu Ch’ijin, Yi Sŏgu, and Yun Paeknam and performed in the Korean language by voice actors who became active in various aspects of radio drama production. In addition, with the increased time for Korean-only programs, radio dramas were no longer limited to one programming slot but could actually be serialized into multiple episodes, as was done with serialized newspaper novels, which did much to popularize both newspapers and radios.

However, in the late colonial period, after the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937 and the onset of the Asia-Pacific War, there were more frequent calls for works that were explicitly labeled as pangsong sosŏl (radio novels) rather than radio dramas in the GGK-operated newspapers,
such as the *Maeil sinbo*. In fact, extant radio novels were mostly published during the late 1930s and early 1940s, when the Japanese colonial government had tightened its control over the colony through a prohibition of Korean publications, language, and media. Sŏ Chaegil states that the emergence and popularity of radio novels can also be derived from the radio broadcasters’ desires to “diversify their programming while attempting to reform the decadent qualities of their entertainment programs.” I also surmise that radio novels would appear to be much simpler to write and perform, befitting an era with fewer resources available to produce a full radio drama that required hiring voice actors, rehearsing, and integrating special sound effects. Furthermore, since radio dramas were live broadcasts, to be rebroadcasted, the entire process had to be restaged, which would have been a costly affair. This was also a time period when newspapers and radios announced calls for both radio novels and *yadam* storytelling contests, which often had pedagogical purposes. In the years after the Second Sino-Japanese War, when radio’s role as a propaganda tool intensified, radio novels became the genre and form through which to “reflect the conditions of current affairs and to best promote the spirit of *naisen ittai*.” This important pedagogical purpose might explain why radio novels and *yadam* were collected and published in book form as well. Unlike radio programs, which appeared to be ephemeral by which sound dispersed into the air, print media helped to document and preserve sound in written form. Hence, radio and print media are intermedial phenomenon, where writing narrative techniques become interlinked with listening practices.

For these reasons, the new, shorter radio novels, which could be broadcasted in about thirty minutes, seem to have best fit the circumstances and goals of the late colonial media field. In addition, in both written and oral forms, radio novels most closely resemble prose fiction. One could even say that there was similarity between the performance of radio novels and the recitation (*nangdok*) of short fiction (*tamp’yŏn sosŏl*), which had its own place in radio programming in the earlier years. Written more like fiction than drama, the radio novel usually does not have multiple voice actors and scene changes. Rather, it is narrated or voiced by a single voice actor, even if multiple characters appear in the text. In this way, the performance of radio novels also resembles traditional *p’ansori* storytelling or *pyŏnsa*’s (*J: benshi*) movie telling during the silent film era. In fact, in the initial years of JODK broadcasting, one of the programs that attracted a steady following was the recitation of East Asian and Korean historical anecdotes (*yadam*) and classical fiction (*kojŏn sosŏl*). With their rhythmic and musical qualities, the historical anecdotes and classical fiction were likely much more fitting for oral performance and listening than was modern fiction (*kŭndae sosŏl*), which was written to be read silently with the eyes rather than to be orally transmitted and heard by others.

**Resituating Kim Tongin as an experimentalist**

Much scholarship on Kim Tongin places the author, his works, and his ideology in direct opposition to the school of thought that saw literature as utilitarian (*kongri chuŭi*) or engagement (*ch’amyŏ*), especially literature’s relationship to societal and political realities, which was advocated by nationalist writers such as Yi Kwangsu and the writers belonging to the Korean Artista Proleta Federation (KAPF). Historians of Korean literature, therefore, tend to classify Kim into the school of thought that advocated ‘literature as pure art’ (*sunsu munhak*), especially as Kim, with Chu Yohan, was a founding editor and publisher in 1919 of the literary magazine *Ch’angjo* (*Creation*), which is largely considered the first literary journal for pure literature. Furthermore, Kim, along with other early-twentieth-century writers, such as Hyŏn Chin’gŏn and Yŏm Sangsŏp, believed that the purpose of literature “lay in the depiction of life as it was.” Because of this, contemporary literary critics have often too broadly analyzed his works through the lens...
of naturalism. Simultaneously, however, Kim also penned historical fiction; popular fiction, such as espionage and detective novels; and works that leaned toward Japanese wartime collaboration. Kim, then, appears to be a contradictory figure, advocating pure literature while engaging in what seems to be commercial and popular pursuits.

I propose that we view Kim Tongin as an experimentalist, rather than fixing him as a figure who represents pure literature. Ultimately, what Kim is interested in, I argue, is the potentials of language and form and their behaviors in producing literary works that aestheticize art so as to bring art, ideology, and medium together in a “revolutionary” way. Here I use the term revolutionary in a Benjaminian sense of mass participation and democratic potential but also in a broader sense of creating newness in literary genres that can lead to changes in human perceptions. Through my analysis of Kim’s radio novel “Nanjing Treaty,” I suggest some of the necessary strategies that colonized Korean elites and writers employed while living and writing under wartime conditions. Simply put, my response is that colonial Korean writers, such as Kim Tongin (along with Pak T’aeewon, Ch’ae Mansik, and Kim Naesŏng, among other notable Korean authors), must have perceived and used the radio as an important space of cultural production, mediation, and communication that could provide alternative perspectives. As Fredric Jameson has argued, the role of radio technology as mediator—or, in Jameson’s terms, transcoder—of ideas and realities of sound dispersion as well as displacement opened up interpretative possibilities for oppressed, colonized subjects.

Fredric Jameson has also shown in his work The Political Unconscious that cultural texts have an “unconscious” in which the meaning of the text is often “repressed and buried” and thus narratives can be analyzed as a “socially symbolic act.” Furthermore, borrowing from Freud, as Benjamin did, Jameson argues that the speaker (and/or author) is always engaged in using language that is socially and historically situated, whether the subject is conscious or unconscious. The Korean wartime radio novel, in particular, can be seen as an aural-oral text that can become politicized at various stages of modes of production and reception—from the initial stages of writing the script to the final stages of listening to the radio program. Enlivening the sonic imagination through the sonic unconscious can open up political and dialectical functions that in turn allow us to rethink Kim’s writings in their relationship to the materiality of radio and to the sociality of sound. To complicate matters, however, as far as we know, no recordings of radio novels from Korea’s colonial period are still extant. Therefore, scholars have to rely on the written text to “read” its sound. Although it is impossible to replicate the exact sonic aspects of the radio novel from the 1940s, imagining the soundscapes of the late colonial period and evoking the sonic unconscious could permit us to reconstruct the mode of hearing sound through our reading. For instance, we could invoke voices and sound effects from early talkie films to imagine late colonial Korea’s soundscape. To be sure, although we should not become trapped in technological determinism, we must ask what happens when a written text is mediated by sound technology and when listening and hearing become central to our analysis. In other words, although we are not able to listen to the actual sound of Kim’s radio novel and radio broadcasts, what I am proposing to do is explore how a writer took advantage of the radio medium. By tracing the trajectory of Kim’s works from historical fiction and modernized (early-twentieth-century) yadam to radio novel and relating them through the sonic unconscious, we can explore how and why Kim’s wartime radio novel writing exists in the form it does.

**From historical novel and yadam to radio novel**

Kim Tongin was one of the Korean authors who continued to write and publish during the latter years of the colonial period rather than discontinue writing as a form of protest, as some Korean
writers did. In fact, many of his works appeared in the *Maeil sinbo* (1910–45) and *Chogwang* (1935–44), a popular variety magazine that increasingly moved toward publishing pro-Japanese texts in the 1940s. Kim Tongin’s “Nanjing Treaty,” written around or after the time Kim had traveled to Northern China as a member of a consolatory group for the Japanese Imperial Army (Huanggun wimun dan), is one of the radio novels included in *Pangsong sosŏl myŏngbak sŏn*, which was published in 1943 by the colonial government for mass mobilization.

Leading the collection of ten radio novels, “Nanjing Treaty” takes the listener/reader back to mid-nineteenth-century Qing China and the turbulent period of the Opium Wars (1839–42) between the Qing and Great Britain. The story takes up as its main character the real historical figure Imperial Commissioner Lin Zexu (1785–1850), who was appointed by the Daoguang Emperor (1782–1850) to enforce an opium ban in Guangzhou. Kim’s text, however, recreates Lin Zexu’s feats, defeats, and ultimately revenge against the British by combining historical fiction, *yadam* storytelling mode, and a pro-Japanese propaganda context in a highly self-conscious narrative appropriate for radio broadcasting.

Although one might find Kim Tongin’s story of Lin Zexu surprising, Kim is not new to either writing historical novels or modeling non-Korean historical figures in his fiction. Kim’s first historical novel, *Chŏlmŭn kŭdil* (*Those Youths*), serialized in the *Tonga ilbo* from September 2, 1930, to November 10, 1931, is the first Korean martial arts novel of the sort filled with fictional characters who sword fight, demand justice, and seek revenge. These young characters are seeking justice on behalf of their ancestors who were assassinated by the Queen Min faction during the late nineteenth century. The only historical figure present in the novel is the Taewon’gun, whom Kim Tongin depicted with such detail so as to cast deep doubt on both the characterization and the broader historical narrative. Kim Tongin continued to write historical novels late into his career, including works such as *Unhyŏngkung ŭi pom* (*The Spring in Unhyŏng Palace*, 1933–4), *Yŏnsangun* (*Prince Yŏnsan*, 1937–9), *Paekmagang* (*Paekma River*, 1941–2), and *Tae Suyang* (*The Great Prince Suyang*, 1946), among many others.

Observing Kim’s and other colonial-period writers’ remarkable interest in historical fiction writing, Pak Chonghong asserts that Kim Tongin’s historical novels, compared to Yi Kwangsu’s or Pak Chonghwa’s, are written with a keen eye toward entertaining readers and thus can be considered commercial or popular literature. Other Korean literary critics have pointed out that Kim Tongin’s historical novels are squarely ahistorical or even anti-historical, especially as these critics equate anti-historical with non-political. For these critics, Kim Tongin’s way of leaving politics out of literature was understood as equivalent to being anti-progressive, a refusal to engage with the political realities of Korea’s colonized status, or at worst being pro-Japanese, especially as Kim’s works do not seem to voice an explicit anticolonial position. Therefore, O Sŏngho argues that Kim’s historical fiction engages in inventing history in order to “create a world that exists only within the author’s own ideal world which refuses to go beyond the imaginary.” Kim Yunsik belittles Tongin’s historical fiction when he states that they are closer to *yadam* than true historical novels. Furthermore, Kim describes Tongin’s historical novels as the author’s “arrogant critique” or manipulation of history, which allowed Tongin to come up with new forms of historical fiction and new interpretations of history but which also severely limited Tongin as an author who could not move beyond his own fixed ideas about literature and his role as a “savior” of literature. Some critics of Kim Tongin, both during his lifetime and thereafter, have looked upon his writing of historical novels with distaste and pity and as evidence of Kim’s growing financial difficulties that forced him to write for monetary exchange. What these critics assume is that external realities should be made legible, stable, and recognizable by authors in their historical novels. Moreover, critics of Kim Tongin’s historical novels as well as scholars of this literary genre in general tend to place fidelity as the central criterion for categorizing and evaluating historical novels.
If Kim’s serialized historical fiction writing garnered dismay from his critics, his yadam writing and his ultimately becoming the publisher of Yadam magazine was looked upon with even greater bewilderment. From various anecdotal statements gleaned from Kim’s contemporaries, it appears that many were rather surprised that Kim not only contributed to Yun Paeknam’s Wŏlgan Yadam (Monthly Yadam, 1935–9) but eventually took over the entire publication and continued it as Yadam (1935–45). Similar to when Kim wrote and serialized historical fiction, other writers viewed as shocking, contradictory, and perhaps even distasteful that he was participating in penning popular literature (t’ongsok munhak) and taking over the editorship of a popular magazine. It looked as though he had moved far from his earlier years of publishing Ch’angjo.

Yet when asked about his work writing and publishing yadam, Kim Tongin replies, “There might be a difference in the material, but in general, these are also stories created through our imagination (sangsang), so it can also be considered fiction.” In his editor/publisher’s introduction, Kim Tongin hints that since the Korean population’s reading level is neither very sophisticated nor large, one of the goals of Yadam magazine is to increase interest in reading by providing pleasurable (hŭngmi) and entertaining (oraksŏng) reading materials for the masses. Included in the inaugural volume of Yadam is Kim Tongin’s own version or translation of Samguk Yusa (Memo- rabilia of the Three Kingdoms), a thirteenth-century text consisting of historical accounts and legends from Korea’s Three Kingdoms Period. In his introduction, Kim writes that this is a “special project that will translate Samguk Yusa into modern language (hyŏndaŏ). This is a major project unprecedented in scope and pride of this magazine. We hope that you enjoy your reading experiences as the story should be appealing not just as Chosŏn history but as exciting and intriguing stories.” This statement shows that Kim Tongin was interested in language history as subject and the narrative form as sites of modernization. What is especially striking is his attention to the mode of storytelling—yadam—which combines both the oral and the written. Moreover, Kim is very conscious of the readership and the potential that yadam has not only for increasing the number of readers (i.e., potential for distributing his work more widely) but, more importantly, for how entertainment can be combined with pedagogical principles that would allow the readers to engage in imaginative and critical reading.

Although yadam as an oral and written literary genre has a history that goes back to the Chosŏn dynasty, what interests me in this chapter is its return through new media, such as newspapers, magazines, and radio broadcasting, in the early twentieth century. In particular, I am interested in the relationship between yadam as a prose narrative that putatively has oral origins and practices, Kim Tongin’s writing of historical novels, and radio novels, all of which, I suggest, are inextricably knitted together. Radio novels were written in the length of a short story, often resembled the oral storytelling tradition of yadam narratives, and were then performed via radio broadcasting made the radio novel texts more accessible and appealing to the masses, compared to reading in Japanese or even the mixed Sino-Korean script. Therefore, for Kim Tongin, who wrote, edited, and published yadam stories, the writing of radio novel “Nanjing Treaty” does not veer far from but instead aligns with what we already know of Kim’s past experiences in writing popular historical fiction and the short story. Kim likely perceived the technology of radio and writing for the radio as a space where new literary genres and forms can be created and where “older” forms such as yadam can be integrated and modernized.

Listening to “Nanjing Treaty”

Kim Tongin’s radio novel, then, comes on the heels of his historical fiction and yadam. Thus far, I have attempted to trace the relationship between Kim’s historical fiction and yadam writings to his radio novel to show that the author is highly self-reflexive and that at every juncture he
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self-consciously crafted his writing. In this way, he can be seen as an experimentalist—not in the sense of the avant-garde but as one who constantly sought ways to test his belief in literature as an artform in which the behavior of language and its cultural techniques can change the way we perceive the world. Kim seems to insist that his literary form and technique, therefore, can be translated from one genre to another, from one register to another, and, of course, from one media to another.

Unfortunately, as I have not found any reviews of or recorded (written) responses from listeners of “Nanjing Treaty” in the print media of that time, the model of the sonic unconscious permits us to engage in speculative reading, situating listeners at different levels. Because there is no sound recording of the radio novel, it is more difficult still to assess the sonic aspects of the narrative and the soundscape of the text. However, as scholars of radio have pointed out, unlike reading a novel or watching a movie, listening to the radio is distinguishable by the fact that it must take place linearly—that is, a radio listener has no ability to fast-forward, rewind, skip, pause, or repeat, although they have the power to change the station and the power to turn off the radio. Therefore, radio listening can be at once passive, where the sound from the radio functions simply as background noise, and active, where the listener can control what they want to hear by turning on or shutting off the device that is carrying the sound. Borrowing from Michel Chion’s theory of listening in film, differently situated listeners can be placed in three different modes of listening: casual listening; semantic listening; and reduced listening.41 It is, therefore, likely that there were diverse types of listeners of “Nanjing Treaty” rather than just those imagined by the colonial government. What might have been heard by the listeners of “Nanjing Treaty”?

Radio’s sonic space: transmitting Korean language

For one, listeners of Kim’s “Nanjing Treaty” had heard the story in the Korean language and through the voice of a Korean actor/storyteller. The radio novel is written in Korean, and there is no indication that Japanese was used in the performance.42 In fact, the text is filled with Sino-Korean lexicon written in mixed script. Throughout the Japanese colonial period, but more intensely so during wartime, language became an acute site of ideological tension. After all, language is never neutral. John Treat writes that in colonial Korea, the discourse on collaboration was very much about language, and thus, Yi Kwangsu’s name conversion to Kayama Mitsuro and his support, if not outright championing, of Japanese-language usage during the Kominka period was deemed as the ultimate sign of collaboration.43

As mentioned earlier, Chosŏn ilbo and Tonga ilbo were shut down, limiting the venue for Korean-language publications. Opportunities to learn, use, and teach Korean were also becoming increasingly rare, while Japanese was made Korea’s “national language” (K: kugŏ and J: kokugo). Unlike the Korean intellectual class, to which most of the Korean writers belonged and many of whom were more than proficient in the Japanese language, the majority of the Korean population was still largely illiterate in reading and writing Korean, and many more were inadequately trained in the Japanese language, despite concerted efforts on the part of the colonial government to implement compulsory education and Japanese-language immersion.44 Furthermore, Korean publications, despite various efforts by linguists and authors to promote the vernacular script, still remained largely using kuk-hanmun or had to mix Chinese characters with the vernacular Korean script.45 The Korean vernacular writing system was hardly standardized or unified during the colonial period, thereby posing confusion and difficulty in reading and writing for the people.46 In other words, despite heralding linguistic nationalism, the vernacular script (neither Korean nor Japanese) did not provide a panacea for nationalist literary
and cultural production, nor did it effectively serve the imperialist propaganda that aimed to enlist and enlighten the masses.

On the other hand, in radio broadcasting, despite more radio programs being aired in Japanese, there still remained time and space for programs that were specifically produced using the spoken Korean language and aimed specifically at Korean language speakers. In addition, unlike film, where both Korean and Japanese viewers often attended the same theater to watch the same film together regardless of language, radio listening, especially due to its dual language programming and the spaces in which radios were installed, remained a medium that could separate listeners by their ethnic backgrounds and language preferences, thereby allowing Korean listeners greater freedom to listen critically and opening up the potential for them to express their reactions to the programs more instinctively. While a radio was likely more expensive for an ordinary person to own than subscriptions to newspapers or other printed materials, radio was more accessible to the larger population, who could just listen to the voices of the Korean performers, unencumbered by difficult reading, in the privacy of their homes alone or with their family, friends, and neighbors in semi-private spaces, such as cafés, where other Korean listeners congregated. Despite the fact that the Korean language was quickly dwindling from public spaces and printed materials during the war years, radio programs continued to create soundscapes of and sonic space for the Korean language.

For Japanese colonial authorities, Korean-language usage in radio posed a dilemma that was probably difficult to resolve. On the one hand, they must have realized the importance of using Korean for disseminating information and mobilizing the masses. On the other hand, permitting the usage of the Korean language seemed to undermine both the institutional policy and the pedagogy of assimilating Koreans into the Japanese Empire by creating an immersive Japanese-language environment. At the same time, colonial authorities might have considered radio’s sound dispersion as ephemeral, transitory, and vanishing, unlike print, which could be documented, archived, and copied. In contrast, for Korean-program producers, the radio might have been sought as a space where language could be practiced, because both the written and oral aspects of language came together in creating a radio program, especially a radio novel. That is, one had to first write the script in Korean to be able to deliver it orally in Korean. Interestingly, it could be the case that for both the Japanese colonial authorities and the Korean radio producers, while they recognized that radio is a highly linguistic medium where language becomes a site of identity, culture, and politics as well as being intertwined with power, radio’s sonic space could also be perceived as a safer space for language to reside precisely because of the perception of the ephemerality of sound.

History’s place: translating East Asian history

Although it is likely that the Kim Tongin’s “Nanjing Treaty” was written under the watchful gaze of Japanese censors, and it certainly contains hwangminhwa tones and messages, this does not necessarily lend the narrative to being purely touting the wartime propaganda. In other words, while we can assume that the propaganda message was not lost given the political circumstances, we can also imagine otherwise. We can ask, for instance, given the way that Kim Tongin’s radio novel is structured and taking into consideration the relationship between “Nanjing Treaty” and his earlier works, how else might have listeners unconsciously heard the radio novel? We might begin by speculating that the majority of listeners tuned into the radio and continued to listen to “Nanjing Treaty” because the story, set during the Opium Wars (1839–42, 1856–60) fought between Qing China and Britain, was first and foremost a familiar historical narrative to them, whereas the explicit political message could become secondary.
I argue that one of the ways to activate the sonic unconscious is through creative translations of history and through fictional embellishments, which can provide alternative hearings. From the first line of “Nanjing Treaty,” the narrative is filled with grandiloquent statements:

The shocking amount of opium that was brought in by the British traders in order to devour Qing’s resources was seized, then set on fire, and burned like rotten vegetables by the strict orders of Special Imperial Commissioner Lin Zexu at Humen.

But Lin Zexu was not satisfied with merely burning opium. He observed his surrounding while the 20,000 crates of opium burned, and its turbid smoke rose to the sky. What he noticed was that the Chinese opium addicts were constantly loitering nearby because it is said that even opium ashes retain their strong addictive elements.47

Using vivid words such as “shocking,” “devour,” and “turbid,” Kim’s “Nanjing Treaty” sets up a narrative that makes audible the narrator’s critical point of view. Lin Zexu’s emotions and psychology of utter exasperation and outrage at having labored at a lost cause fighting the “thieves” is also well captured:

now with opium flooding the market, the price will naturally plummet. The days of it being hard to acquire or too costly are gone. Instead, everyone will now become opium addicts.

What is he to do about this inexpressible sense of resentment and enmity? What kind of sense was he to make of this inhumane act of sweeping an entire nation into a hellish pit just to earn a meager profit? What’s more, he racked his brain thinking about a way to avenge these criminal acts of political oppression and military brutality.

His teeth chattered, and he felt so enraged that he couldn’t restrain his mind or body.48

Told from the third-person point of view, these dramatic descriptions of opium addicts and emotional responses punctuate the text, allowing listeners not only to gain insights into Lin Zexu’s indignant emotions and the British empire’s ruthlessness but also to respond with their own instinctual unconscious. The auditory pull resides with both the narrator and the character of Lin Zexu, thereby creating a collective perception of injustice. Certainly, the narrator is not neutral, but one who sympathizes with Lin Zexu and who lends a voice of indignation that the listeners can identify with and even draw on. Combined with documentary realism in the genre of historical fiction and dramatic oral performances of modernized yadam narratives (which tend to be filled with superlatives and emotive descriptions), Kim’s sonic narrative mitigates and even masks the imperialist propaganda message in favor of the dramatic human story of Chinese masses and Lin Zexu.

Indeed, “Nanjing Treaty” straddles history and fiction. It is surely not intended to be a documentary history or historical text written by a professional historian. The radio novel begins with a dramatic opening describing the fate that befell China as a result of opium sales and Lin Zexu’s attempt at wiping it out. Then it takes an abrupt documentary-like turn to outline the unequal terms of the Nanjing Treaty whereby Qing China was forced to agree to open more ports for further trade, paying indemnities, extraterritoriality, and recognition of Britain, among others. Having failed to bring about a peaceful negotiation, Lin Zexu is exiled in Kim’s text as well as in historical reality. The radio novel, however, then takes another abrupt fictional turn when Lin, in his place of exile, notices the troublesome behavior of some local Chinese children. He observes that upon eating some cookies that a British couple had freely given out to them,
the children behaved strangely and appeared “gloomy and pale.”\(^{49}\) It turns out that the British couple was spiking cookies with opium and distributing them to the children so that they would become addicted to the drug, which would lead to further dependence on it. Indeed, this radio novel is more proximate to fantasy and fairy tale than history.

Even the historical setting sets Kim’s radio novel apart from the majority of radio novels included in Pangsŏng sosŏl myŏngiak sŏn, which are set in everyday life in colonial Korea or the hopeful future of the Japanese Empire. What’s more, the text concerns not Korean but Chinese history. Framing his radio novel in the historical past could obscure a reality of contemporary politics that focused on mobilizing the masses. However, as I will show in this chapter, present history becomes even more intensely audible in Kim’s text as listeners are led to question time, space, and history, thereby activating the sonic unconscious.

Reading (and listening) beyond the literal setting of “Nanjing Treaty” evokes the time period contemporaneous with Kim’s life and the airing of his radio novel. In 1932, Japan successfully established the puppet state of Manchuko after the Japanese Kwantung army overran Manchurian locals in 1931. Further penetration of inland China continued, and by 1937 the then capital of Nationalist China, Nanjing, fell to the Japanese military. In fact, by late 1938, Japan controlled much of the territory below the Yangtze River. While Japanese advances in China slowed by 1939, by this time, many of the urban centers and railroads were controlled by Japan. Given this backdrop of Japanese wartime activities in China, it might not be a mere coincidence that Kim Tongin sets his radio novel in China and in a period of the early nineteenth century during which cities such as Guangzhou and Nanjing experienced their first major imperialist encroachments by the West.

Although Japan ultimately surrendered at the end of World War II, an uncanny parallel can be drawn between the Opium Wars and the Second Sino-Japanese War. Most Korean listeners will recall the story of the Opium Wars even if they do not know all the historical details. And some might have drawn the parallel where Japan is a metonym for Great Britain. If read in the context of hwangmin literature and a pro-Japan position, “Nanjing Treaty” harkens back to China’s downfall and the imperial power’s victory, yet this time, the imperial power is not Britain but Japan. Indeed, much of the radio novel narrates the outnumbered and weak Qing military, the breakdown of the negotiations between Qing and Britain, and Qing’s shortcomings in the war. It also details the terms of the treaty that forced China to concede territory, honor, finances, trade, diplomacy, and so on by listing the terms in the text in a documentary-like form.

Not only can Great Britain be replaced with Japan, but the novel also can be heard in the context of Japanese imperialist discourses on the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, where the West (Britain) is situated as the imperialist archenemy against which Asian powers must unite to overcome. In the opening scene, Lin Zexu utters, “This is what one calls a thief getting away clean. How dare they complain about what our government is doing in our own country? The shamelessness of these Western imperialists is certainly different from us Asians.”\(^{50}\) If heard in this context, the content of Kim’s radio novel can certainly fall into what appears to be the promotion of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere and the Japanese imperialist war project. In other words, for the situated Japanese colonial censors and supporters of Japanese imperialism listening to this program, the text integrated well the core message of praising Japan and predicting Japanese victory. However, for the segment of situated listeners living under colonialism, the sad reality was one in which Korea’s conditions had to be “invented,” “disguised,” or “unconscious” if they had any chance of being enunciated at all. Furthermore, for these Korean listeners, the textual absence of Japan in Kim’s radio novel was not really about absence but about the real masked presence of Japan’s imperialist expansion and system of coercion.
Fictional field: embellishing character and voice

It is in the last third of the radio novel that a seamless shift to fiction from the documentary mode takes place. Lin Zexu transforms fully into a fictional character, and the auxiliary characters, especially the children, also play integral roles augmenting the fictional turn. This fictional turn resembles the modern *yadam* narrative technique where historical events and figures are recreated with the insertion of fantastical elements, leading to the narrative becoming “unofficial histories,” “tales,” or “talks” with pedagogical, especially enlightenment and entertainment, purposes for the young and the non-elite readership. In “Nanjing Treaty,” Kim enlaces his radio novel with a modernized form of *yadam* by recreating Lin Zexu as a detective figure in the last section. Although the main character, Lin Zexu, does not possess advanced scientific or technological tools, such as fingerprinting tools, cameras, or microscopes, which would be focalized in detective fiction written during the 1930s and 1940s, he adopts the type of deductive reasoning that a literary detective like Sherlock Holmes would use. This permits him to bring together both scientific and melodramatic narrative techniques and to clearly articulate them by using a voice of the detached, objective, but nevertheless incensed narrator. According to the narrator, Lin becomes suspicious when the children in the neighborhood are impelled to wait for cookies being handed out by the British family. Lin observes the children carefully, watching their behavior, their habits, and their appearances from head to toe, especially their facial expressions:

The moment the man came out from his house, on the vacuous faces of the children appear rapturous smiles. After they receive some cookies from the man, they automatically gulp them down in whole without even bothering to chew. After they had finished the cookies, their eyes become vacant and as if they were seeing something for the first time, they plop themselves down on the ground right there and then.51

Lin then conducts an experiment where he gives his own niece a suspicious cookie to observe what she does and says. When he returns home that evening, she frantically blares out, and they exchange rapid questions and answers:

“Uncle.”
“Yes?”
“What kind of cookies were they exactly?
“Why? They’re cookies, what else could they be? What’s the matter?”
“Uncle, where did you get them? Who sold them to you?”
“What’s the problem.”
“Whoever sold you those cookies needs to be arrested, and based on our law, you should punish them right away. There’s a big problem. If it is delayed at all, there would be a big disaster.”
“Ahh, what’s the matter. Tell me the reason.”
“Because those cookies have opium in them.”52

With this scene, the radio novel indeed takes a fictional, if not fantastical, turn into not just an unofficial historical novel but a detective novel or even an espionage novel that exposes the British family as spies, Lin Zexu as a clever detective, and his young niece as an essential figure in helping to solve the mystery of the strange behaviors and appearances of the local children.53 Lin Zexu’s subsequent letter to the British ambassador seeking “just punishment” receives a succinct reply stating that “There is no such British-named person registered as residing in China;
therefore, do as you please and I will not interfere." The section concludes with a greatly embellished fictional ending that suggests that the British have capitulated.

To be sure, despite the new ending in Kim’s radio novel, it does not override China’s history or humiliation, nor does it condone Kim Tongin having participated in writing a pro-imperialism piece. What Kim’s historical radio novel does is to play with truth and falsehood, or fiction and history, by creating an alternative narrative of what-if with an ambiguous ending that could be heard on heterogeneous levels by differently situated listeners. Such embellishments activate listeners to question the accuracy, fill in the gaps, and hear parallels based on the content and context.

The penultimate sentence of the radio novel narrates Lin Zexu’s response to the British ambassador’s capitulation: “When he read this reply, a wry smile appeared on Lin Zexu’s face.” Instead of a longer historical confutation or an onomatopoeia indicating a victorious roar, the narrative simply tells us that there was a silent but mysterious smile on Lin’s face. This is similar to how the narrative describes the children’s facial expressions and behaviors as they were consuming the opium-spiked cookies. Instead of making audible the sounds that would emit from the characters’ “rapturous smiles” or “wry smile,” the sound is left to be imagined by the sonic unconscious. Although silent, this “wry smile” is the sound that the listeners heard; it thereby created a new structural formation of the subject who can make and hear new sounds and meanings.

**Conclusion**

As Walter Ong writes, oral performances highly depend on mnemonics to convey their message. Kim Tongin’s radio novel, however, goes beyond simply relying on mnemonics. Bringing together the familiarity of the history of the Opium War and the foreignness of the story of Lin Zexu’s opium-spiked cookies, Kim’s radio novel propels the listener to become more discerning and thus to reach into their sonic unconscious. Mediated by the radio, the sonic narrative disseminated, scattered, and fragmented the message. Listening to Kim’s radio novel, therefore, is unlikely to lead the listener to one truth or one history. If Korean listeners failed to hear the core wartime, imperialist propaganda message, it could be argued that the site of listening to radio novels became a site of failure both for mobilization in terms of content and for assimilation in terms of language.

At the same time, the author must have realized that listening is a highly incorporative activity. Kim’s turn to historical fiction and then his subsequent bringing together of the yadam performances and writing for radio provided a public space for listeners to share in forming their unconscious desires and fears by way of listening to history and human drama, which could have broader consequences for political, social, and cultural mobilization. In “Nanjing Treaty,” Kim Tongin recreates Lin Zexu as a justice-seeking detective figure by injecting the story with historical contexts and fictional events. The listener gets to perceive Lin not only as a hardline, anti-opium, anti-British drug fighter, as we are accustomed to knowing through textbooks or historical texts, but also as someone who is obsessively concerned about the welfare of his entire country and Chinese children in particular. He is observant and resourceful, like a detective. Most of all, he is incensed by the injustices that the British military has wrought; the British merchant’s greedy, profit-seeking practices; and the exploitation and inhuman treatment of innocent, powerless children.

Constructed this way, Lin Zexu could be any Korean living under Japanese colonial rule. In addition, by inserting auxiliary characters, especially the children and the niece, as integral co-heroes in the narrative, Kim Tongin not only deepens the fictional and yadam aspect of the
historical fiction but more importantly opens up a space for our sonic unconscious to create alternative histories to be heard and to engage in critical listening. In fact, in “Nanjing Treaty,” it is not Lin’s grand acts of dumping opium and combating the British military and merchants that the radio novel points to as being successful. It could be strongly suggested that it is these fictional elements or the new parts of the story that lend weight to Kim’s text as more critical of the historical realities than the documentary aspect of the novel. Kim Tongin’s “ahistorical” radio novel is an attempt to make sense of or represent the external realities—history—that were in chaos or had been made ahistorical through the contradictions of colonialism and personal tragedies. In fact, I suggest that reading Kim’s historical novel along with his yadam and radio novels can show us that Kim’s work is not frivolous and ahistorical but rather a serious literary attempt to engage with finding new directions in writing and translating cultural and literary history that is also closely attuned to listening to literature.

Notes

1 Kyŏngsŏng Broadcast Station’s call sign JODK was consistent with mainland Japan’s radio call signs JOAK (Tokyo), JOBK (Osaka), and JOCK (Nagoya). JO is the international call sign assigned to Japan. The fact that Seoul’s call sign was named JODK, following the call signs of these three Japanese stations, can be seen as an instance of the governor general of Korea’s assimilation policy.

2 Benjamin, “Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” 222.

3 The term optical unconscious appears earlier in Benjamin’s essay “The Little History of Photography” (1931). The idea is expanded and extrapolated to film in his “Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” Benjamin continued to revise this essay, and there are three versions. In the more recent edition, translated by Eiland and Jennings, the passage I quote is slightly different. The translators also use the term optical unconscious (266).

4 Ibid.

5 See Benjamin’s Radio Benjamin.

6 Benjamin, Selected Writings, vol. 2, 543.

7 See W. J. T. Mitchell’s work What Do Pictures Want? which serves as an important beginning of the visual or “pictorial turn” in literary and media analysis.


9 Ong, Orality and Literacy, 10.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid., 133.

12 Yadam is a compound word consisting of Chinese characters for unofficial and talk, which can be translated into English as “anecdotes,” “miscellany,” or even “historical romance.” It is probably best described as traditional popular literature (ch’ŏng tongseok munhak). For this essay, I have chosen to keep the Korean word yadam untranslated. However, when read along with Kim’s other writings, yadam might come closer to being translated as “historical romance” or “historical anecdotes,” especially given that they are retellings of older, pre-existent narratives.

13 The beginnings of total war in Japan can be dated to 1938 with the legislation of National Mobilization Law in March 1938. This controversial law gave government the authority to direct all resources, including civilian resources, to the war effort.


15 The Korean Motion Picture Ordinance of 1940 basically dissolved all Korean film production and placed it under the Korean Motion Picture Production Corporation, which was essentially a Japanese colonial government–established and –operated organization.

16 Tsugawa, Sarajin hoch’ul puho, 90–2.

17 Ibid., 98.


19 NHK or Japan Broadcasting Corporation. NHK was formed by consolidating the three urban broadcasting stations (Tokyo, Osaka, Nagoya) into a single corporation in 1926.

20 See Jina E. Kim, “New Media and Colonial Korea” for analysis of Ch’ae Mansik’s novel Peace Under Heaven, where Korean consumption of radio is depicted.
Sonic unconscious and wartime radio novel

21 Maeil sinbo operated as the official newspaper of colonial state and was the only vernacular newspaper in print until Liberation in 1945. There were several other important Korean-language journals that continued to publish in limited issues throughout the 1940s. These included Chogwag (The Light of Korea, until 1944), Samchi’illi (Three Thousand Li, until 1942), and Sinsidae (New Era, 1941–45). For more on the history of Korean journals/magazines, see Ch’oe T’okgyo, Han’guk chajip packnyôn.

22 Sô Chaekil, “Han’guk kundae pansong munye yôn’gu,” 77.

23 Ibid., 79.

24 See Ch’on Chöngwhan’s Kündae ùi ch’ekilgi for more on reading culture and reading public in early-twentieth-century Korea.

25 For a representative study on Kim Tongin, see Kim Yunsik’s Kim Tongin yon’gu.

26 O’Rourke, “Realism in Early Modern Fiction,” 651. See also Kang Insuk’s Kim Tongin: Saengae wa munye.


29 Ibid., 20.


31 Although recordings of radio novels via radio are not extant, there is a collection of gramophone recordings of plays (dramas), film commentaries, and folktales, which provide a sense of the colonial Korea media soundscape. See Ch’oe Tonghyön and Kim Mansu, Ilhe kangiônggyo yuônggi ümban sok ù kùk, yônghwa.

32 A number of colonial-period Korean talkie films have been made available that help us to sense the soundscape of colonial Korea in the 1930s and 1940s. Mimong (Sweet Dreams, 1936), Pando ùi pom (Spring on the Peninsula, 1941), and Chosun haehyep (Straits of Chosun, 1943) are some primary examples. Spring on the Peninsula is especially pertinent in that the film is about filmmaking.

33 Pansong sosol can be literally translated as “broadcast novels” or “broadcast fiction.” I have translated the term as “radio novels” since during this time, they were written to be delivered through the radio.

34 Kim Yunsik, “Uri yôksa sosol ùi naekaji yuhyông,” 159–66. According to Kim, Cholmôn kêtôil is modeled after popular Japanese samurai novels of the 1920s that were set in the Edo period.

35 Pak Chônghong, “Ilhe kangiônggyo yôksa sosol,” 583–6. According to Pak, Yi Kwangsu’s and Pak Chônghwa’s historical fiction works engage in reconstructing national heroes to raise national consciousness and insert enlightenment ideals.

36 See in particular O’S “Kim Tongin sosol ùi panyôksasông e taehayô,” 199.

37 Ibid., 200.

38 Kim Yunsik, “Kim Tongin munhak ùi seokaji hyôngsik,” 47.

39 Cited in Sin Sang’il “Kim Tongin ùi Yadam chahpîrûl t’onghae pon kündae yadam ùi sôsà kihoek,” 253. The original is from Kim Tongri’s memoir, which is based on his conversation with Kim Tongin in 1936.

40 Ibid., 259.


42 Unlike Kim Tongin’s text, Pak T’ae’won’s radio novel Kkoma Panyang (Young leader), which follows Kim’s, is dotted with Japanese phrases and words in the written form. Kim Tongin was also more than capable of writing in Japanese, having studied in Japan during his earlier years.

43 Treat, “Choosing to Collaborate,” 89. This is not to say that the content is less important in determining acts of collaboration.

44 Tsurumi, “Colonial Education in Korea and Taiwan,” 275–311.

45 Kim, “The Han’gûl Crisis and Language Standardization,” 9. Michael Kim cites a Tonga ilbo article from the 1950s that shows that Korean publications had, even in the postwar period, retained the kâk-hammunch’e. The early privately published newspaper Tongnip sinmun (The Independent, 1896–99) advocated the use of Han’gûl-only policy, while Tonga ilbo and Chosun ilbo, the two major vernacular newspapers founded in 1920, used mixed script.

46 Ibid., 20–2.


48 Ibid., 21.

49 Ibid., 23.

50 Ibid., 7, emphasis added.

51 Ibid., 24.

52 Ibid., 23–4.
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53 Kim Tongin has also written detective/espionage fiction. His best-known work is สูตรยาของนั่นเธอ (Beyond the Horizon), which was serialized in the Masil sinbo between July 10, 1934, and December 19, 1934.


55 Ibid. The word that Kim uses here is koso, which I have translated as a “wry smile” or a “sweet-bitter smile.”

56 Kim Tongin’s criticism of Yi Kwangsu’s historical novel Tandong aesa makes the point that Yi’s novel is written more like a historical text and lacks the literariness and the literary form. See Kim Tongin’s “Ch’unwŏn yŏn’gu,” 156.

Works cited


