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Author

Hanscom, Christopher P.

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Matters of Fact: Language, Science, and the Status of Truth in Late Colonial Korea

Christopher P. Hanscom, University of California, Los Angeles

Abstract

This article addresses the status of the fact in literary and historical discourses in late colonial Korea, focusing on the elaboration of the relationship between scientific and literary truths primarily in the work of philosopher and critic Sō Insik (1906–?). It points to a growing tendency in late 1930s and early 1940s Korea to question the veracity of the fact (or of empiricism more broadly) in an environment where the enunciation of the colonial subject had been rendered problematic and objective statements had arguably lost their connection with social reality. In a period when the relationship between signifier and referent had come into question, how did this major critic understand the relationship between science and literature, or between truth and subjectivity? Sō warns against a simplistic apprehension of the notion of truth as unilaterally equivalent with what he calls “scientific truth” (*kwahakchōk chilli*)—a nomological truth based on objective observation and confirmation by universal principles—and argues that a necessary complement to apparently objective truth is “literary truth” (*munhakchōk chinsil*). Against the fixed, conceptual form of scientific thought, literary truth presents itself as an experiential truth that returns to the sensory world of the sociolinguistic subject (*chuch'e*) as a source of credibility.

Keywords: literary history, colonial discourse, colonial modernity, factuality, science, scientific truth, Sō Insik, late colonial Korea

Against the positivism which halts at phenomena—“There are only facts”—
I would say: no, facts are just what there aren't, there are only interpretations.

—Friedrich Nietzsche

Introduction

Much work on colonial modernity has turned its attention to discourse, to the rules external to language that dictate when, where, and by whom it may be spoken or written, and to the rules internal to language that determine how it is classified and ordered (Foucault 1972, 216, 220). In

grappling with not only how language might reflect social or political life in its form or content but also how language might aggregate to itself the power to act in the world, this thoughtful consideration of discourse—of the importance and complexity of language under colonial rule—has been effective in moving beyond the often polarized political possibilities that characterized earlier studies of the period in Korea.

As Ch'a Sŭnggi has pointed out, one of the most influential examples of discourse linked to the rise of both modernity and colonialism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was that of science. Science occupied a privileged position in colonial discourse, identified with (or even seen as identical to) modern civilization. Ch'a writes, "It is no exaggeration to say that a generalized scientific understanding reigned as the method with most authority in its 'knowledge' of the world and humankind." Science provided an expanded explanatory power, a capacity to analyze and classify in both natural and social worlds, and in the process became its own ideology of expansion (2012, 9–10).

At the same time, science as a concept signified differently in different periods. Ch'a argues that, during the so-called enlightenment period (late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries), science functioned as a world view, a new way of apprehending and ordering the world; in contrast, during the colonial period and the rise of capitalism in the colony, science was understood primarily as a method, one that subsequently developed into a techno-instrumentalist sensibility characterizing the period of imperialization and total war—the penetration of the self and the social by scientific understanding and the instrumentalization of human life (8). We might identify these as stages: first, the discovery of the real (characterized by a movement from fantasy to real, from premodern spirits to early-modern heroes, a period in which the real became the "absolute ground" of knowledge of the world); second, the manipulation or rationalization of the real (the commodification and instrumentalization of nature); and third, with the penetration of that techno-instrumentalist logic into human relations and self-understanding, a loss of the real—a loss that, as Ch'a notes, was at the root of the familiar subjective split of modernity, the crisis consciousness that accompanied the onset of the modern.

The complicity between discourses of science and empire in structuring the colonial relation is well known. Modern science has been "widely considered a purely West European creation" (Raj 2007, 1); further, "the idea that science and technology were among the gifts that Western imperial powers brought to their colonies was an integral part of the discourse of the

‘civilizing mission,’ one vaunted by both proponents and critics of the methods of colonialism” (Seth 2009, 373). As Suman Seth points out, the language of science—so closely linked with modernity and the imperial project—served to express a common interest among colonial elites and imperialist officials. Yet it is also important to recognize that the discourse of factual science had the potential to call into question epistemological limits and thus the content of the real itself:

Historical actors’ attempts to get “full, precise, and accurate facts” often undermined and transformed many of the assumptions that brought them to the continent in the first place. Experts’ emphasis on accuracy, in other words, called into question at significant junctures the limits not only of the ways they pursued knowledge, but also the very content of that knowledge. (Tilley 2005, 247)¹

Key to this discussion of science, then, is the category of the real and its relation to discourse. Julia Adeney Thomas observes that, amid Foucault’s well-known focus on discursive formations, he also acknowledged a prediscursive reality—“the enigmatic treasure of ‘things’ anterior to discourse”—and she takes up the problem of the gap between the discursive and the prediscursive or nonlinguistic in her essay on photography and the practice of history (2009, 153).² The photograph appears to offer “immediate access to past realities” and is often treated as a form of “unmediated recognition.” Yet Thomas maintains that the photograph withholds full knowledge, remains enigmatic, and must be dealt with as (borrowing Joan Scott’s words) “an interpretation that needs to be interpreted” (151). The photograph begins to make sense only when read in light of the “discursive and material whole out of which it emerged” (153), that “regular formation of objects” that appears only in discourse (Foucault 1972, 47). Thomas posits two approaches to objects like photographs that appear to offer such immediate access to reality: precognitive “recognition” and interpretive “excavation.”³

Under a regime of scientific thought, factuality is that which is treated as an unmediated point of access to the real. Yet the fact came under contention in 1930s and early 1940s colonial Korea, when facticity—the “fact of facts”—became embedded in a network of interpretation, a network that moved the fact from a reality “anterior to discourse” to one structured by language, the medium of understanding and interpretation. Here, the fact—or scientific knowledge more generally—did not provide easy access to reality, but instead worked to raise the question of how people know what they know. Facts appear at certain times and places and are assigned

meaning—become part of the “regular formation of objects”—in language, and in language those facts become malleable in a way that calls into question an essential objectivity.

What might this apparent malleability of knowledge of the world have meant for cultural production in late colonial Korea? The nature of the connection between literature and reality, though not a new question, has been central to literary history in Korea since the early twentieth century, and I have written elsewhere on the “crisis of representation” that stemmed from the contentious relationship between language and the real in 1930s literary theory and practice (Hanscom 2013). At the same time, beyond how the idea of the real functioned in terms of literary practice and history, it is also important to think about these debates at the level of social discourse, linking “how things might be known” with “what must or should be known” and attempting to understand the role of culture in the active propagation of certain knowledge, or forms of knowing.

Following an introduction to the debates around “facticity” in late 1930s colonial Korea, then, I read the work of critic and philosopher Sō Insik (1906–?) as an attempt to retheorize the individual experience of social fact in the context of Japanese empire, considering specifically the capacity (or incapacity) of language to deliver truth. Sō was a practicing Marxist-Leninist and an activist in the Korean Communist Party during the late 1920s and early 1930s. He was a leading presence in the intellectual circles of the late 1930s and early 1940s, closely associated with Ch’oe Chaesō and the journal *Liberal Arts Critique*.⁴ Sō’s definition of the role of literature and concomitant emphasis on the derivation of truth in language comes at the end of the 1930s, in the midst of an increasingly harsh period of colonial rule guided by a policy of imperialization. At this moment in history, Koreans were compelled to adopt Japanese names, to forgo the use of the Korean language in both public and private life, and to speak and write under an increasingly intolerant censorship. This repression was accompanied by discourses of a “New East Asian Order” (*Tonga sin chilsō*), which proposed a unification of the region in economic, social, political, and cultural terms. This unification promised equality even as it established Japan as the hegemonic center, and was consequently a typically paradoxical colonial discourse that relied on indeterminacy to perpetuate its legitimacy. Sō thus raised the question of representational truth at a time when concepts of both truth and language were under crisis in multiple fields of social reality.

Science is treated in this article—as it is in Sō’s critique—not as an unmediated form of knowledge but as a phenomenon that gives us occasion to consider the importance of language in the analysis of the imperial context and to expand on the relationship between scientific, literary, and colonial discourses. In examining the discussion of fact and scientific knowledge in the work of authors, critics, and thinkers of the period, I aim to question not only the fact in relation to language and culture, but also methods of interpretation that implicitly accept a reality taken to be identical with itself—whether natural, social, racial, national, or other—posited by the seemingly neutral and objective language of science.

Facticity: The Fact of Facts⁵

The representation of things as they are (*sasil* 寫實), and the place of the fact (*sasil* 事實) within that representation, came to the fore in debates around the veracity of the historical fact (*sasil* 史實) or the fact of facts—facticity—in the late 1930s and early 1940s.⁶ Key articles by well-known critics (Ch’oe 1938; Im 1938; Paek 1938) carried the discussion forward; the very controversy around the concept of the fact “gives us the sense of a situation in which the confidence of the subject [*chuch’e*] and belief in the forward development of history was shaken” (H. Yi 2006, 220). Particularly in the 1930s, following the Japanese invasion of China and the institution of a total war system at home and in the colonies,

A positive response to reality [*hyönsil*] was no longer possible.... Intellectuals came to fundamentally question the accepted “development” of history. This was of necessity accompanied by a fundamental questioning of progress [*chinbo*], and gave rise to doubts regarding a lucid rationality, the subject’s [subjective] perception of reality.⁷ (H. Yi 2006, 221)

With imperialization, “attempts to grasp in literature the totality of real relations through realism were impeded, and this resulted in a change of direction as far as ‘scientific understanding’” was concerned, Ch’a Sŭnggi writes. “What emerged was a situation of acute doubt as to the authority secured by science and a scientific understanding of reality,” especially in the realms of literature and culture (2012, 32). The breakdown of the mentality that had maintained Europe’s claim to universality—a system based on a scientific spirit or order—led to a “crisis consciousness” under Japanese empire (33). More broadly, this can be linked to what Allan Megill calls the collapse, or “death,” of historicism and the “faith in progress that was the widely diffused, vulgarized form

of historicism”—a “growing awareness of the flux and multiplicity of history, and a growing consciousness of the subjectivity of its apprehension” (1985, xii– xiii).⁸

Paul Valéry’s idea of a “century of fact”—which had become a catchphrase in 1930s colonial Korea—took this crisis as indicating an uncertain, “tangled” reality in which no fixed meaning was possible, a “tissue of multiple threads...[that] no one can any longer trace...to their origins or understand the tug of their meaning” (1962, 217).⁹ As Valéry writes in his 1926 essay “The Persian Letters: A Preface,” the fact—which he associates with barbarism and the “mere coercion of bodies by bodies”—declines with the emergence of the “reign of order,” an order of symbols and signs, “a conjured edifice...founded on writing, an obedience to words” (215–216). This, in turn, signals the emergence of an era characterized by its distance from primitive necessities (218). Even as he satirizes this contemporary “reign of fiction,” with its “unlimited exercise of speech unrelated to action,” Valéry warns of a potential return to an era of fact, an era in particular of *scientific* fact, and asks whether society can maintain its coherence in the face of a factual logic of precision, “relying only on what is measurable and verifiable” (218).

It was around the concept of the fact that issues of subjectivity, history, language, and truth also coalesced in colonial Korea. The diminished power of the subject to apprehend, understand, and represent reality (in language) and the arbitrarily selective nature of history, in combination with the simplistic imposition of models of identity in the colonial context, produced a deep skepticism toward the certainty of prediscursive knowledge that factuality implied. At the same time the late colonial period was an era during which—in Valéry’s words—one was *not* “still free to doubt what is doubtful and to maintain what is not” (1962, 3). Ch’oe Chaesŏ leads off his 1938 article on the “Century of the Fact” with Valéry’s use of this phrase, singling out the French intellectual’s expression of a distrust of history, a denial of historical objectivity. As Valéry writes in his 1932 “Historical Fact,” the historian has no choice but to

choose, that is, agree not only on the *existence* but also on the *importance* of the fact.... Men can *believe* only what seems to them least tainted with humanity.... But since we cannot retain everything, and since we have to free ourselves from the infinitude of facts by judging their relative interest for the future, the decision on importance inevitably reintroduces into the historical work the very thing we had just tried to eliminate. (1962, 121, emphases in original)

For Valéry, what was called “history” was no more than an accumulation of “facts”—“it was through the *subject* of history that facts were selected and arranged [into a narrative]—thus what was called the objectivity of history could not be guaranteed” (H. Yi 2006, 220).¹⁰ A “*pure* history, history composed of *facts* only,” he writes, “is quite pointless, for facts by themselves have no meaning. From time to time, someone says to you: ‘This is a fact. You must bow before the fact.’ What he is trying to say is: ‘You must *believe* ... you must believe because man has had nothing to do with it. It is things themselves speaking. *It is a fact*” (Valéry 1962, 123–124).¹¹ Even beyond Valéry’s point that one has to “do” something with facts (select, arrange, prioritize, and so on), the introduction of facts into language (facticity) already undermines the idea of a purely objective knowledge or historical practice.

Yi Hyönsik identifies leftist critic An Hamgwang¹² as one who responded to this newly mythologized nature of factitious discourse by proposing a “spirit of fact” (*sasil chöngsin*), a mentality that did not discard the logic of the fact, but that remained constantly aware that facts existed within a dialectic between subject and object (An 1939). Yi remains critical of An’s perspective, however, on the grounds that in order for the subject of history to attain this “spirit,” not only are certain underlying concepts assumed (objective truth, historical necessity, universality, and so on), but the entire burden of apprehending factual history is placed on the same subject. “The problem is that [An] doesn’t explain whether or not one must be within [or without] this subject-object dialectical relation with reality in order for the subject to attain this spirit of fact” (H. Yi 2006, 223)—a problem I take up below in Sö Insik’s work on the place of the subject in knowledge production.

Another thinker cited by Ch’oe Chaesö in the 1938 article mentioned above is French philosopher and novelist Julien Benda (1867–1956), in particular his 1928 work *The Treason of the Intellectuals*. How, Ch’oe asks, is “fact” to be utilized in leading humankind? “Intellectuals who relax in [their responsibility to] address this serious problem commit the sin that Julien Benda spoke of” (Ch’oe 1938, 5). This “crime” is the turn of the intellectual away from disinterested considerations of the universal and transcendent and toward the material and particular interests of “political passions”—racial, class, and national hatreds particular to the modern period. Intellectual theorizing of these passions tends toward two directions, both of which fall for Benda under the “cult of fact”: the claim that a certain politics is in line with “the development of evolution” or the inevitable “unrolling of history” (that is, the discovery of

“historical laws” that support a particular political position); and the claim that a particular political ideology is founded on science, is “the result of a ‘precise observation of facts’” (Benda [1928] 2009, 28).¹³ That is, the intellectuals’ “treason” found both a nomological and scientific basis for its claims—both of which are grounded precisely in a factitious understanding of reality and an abandonment of any consideration of the relationship between (historical, scientific) facts and the subjective expression of those facts in language.¹⁴

Accordingly, we can observe three things here: first, that the expression of the real came under intense scrutiny in the late colonial period, particularly in the concept of the fact and its role in science, politics, and history; second, that a systematic understanding of the subject’s relation to that real and to language was seen as necessary in order to theorize not only the critique of historical objectivity and scientific discourse, but also the place of the intellectual in relation to the sociopolitical developments that rendered the relationship between the real and its expression suspect; and third, as we will see below, that in this uncertain context of crisis literature could be understood as a technique or practice capable of both expressing the relation between subjective experience and factual knowledge (“actuality”) and returning the fact of that relation to subjective knowledge.

Truth in Literature: Sō Insik’s Late Colonial Writings on Literary Ethics

Sō Insik, a leading critic and philosopher of the period, expressed the gap between fact and subjective experience as a question of ethics. Using Hegelian terms, he theorized the experience of the social as a dialectic between individual morality (*Moralität*), especially as linked with feeling or emotion (*Gemüt*), and formal society (*Sittlichkeit*). According to Sō, there are two approaches to thinking about ethics:

First, as a social-collective body, we speak of all the social methods and regulations, the social order which disciplines the attitudes and actions of humans in their relations with one another; secondly, we have an individual’s subjective-expressive stance toward these various social regulations and order... Ethics can thus only be within the limits of ...what is commanded and what should be. Therefore, at the limits of what we can say regarding ethics, we must be concerned with these two aspects: on the one hand, the ethical order, *Sittlichkeit* [yulli ũi kwansŭpsŏng] and on the other hand, ethical morality, *Moralität* [yulli ũi simchŏngsŏng]. (1940, 12)

Sittlichkeit refers to institutionalized convention, social patterns, and norms (tradition, custom, laws, etiquette, culture, and so on), that “force of unvarying direction, which is to the soul what force of gravity is to the body, ensur[ing] the cohesion of the group by bending all individual wills to the same end” (Bergson [1932] 1935, 255).¹⁵ Opposed to the particular and nomothetic character of *Sitte*, “morality” is at once universal and individual, a linear-centrifugal force counteracting the centripetal force of custom and convention. Whereas *Sitte* is the ethics of an *ethnos* or class, *Moralität* is a universal ethics of the human being (Sö 1940, 13).¹⁶

This duality helps to define the subject beyond the individual, in that the self only becomes a “developed unity” through entrance into the social, as the social and the individual are understood as mutually defining (Regev 2005, 588; Bergson [1932] 1935, 7). While constant tension between individual will and social order conditions this process of mutual definition, the relation may also arrive at a moment in which the “sublation of the individual to the whole” ceases, and significant conflict emerges, with the “division of the content and form of ethics, the historical and the human, the particular and the universal, substance and subjectivity into elements of abstract opposition” (Sö 1940, 16). Within this disjunction, as the centrifugal force of humanity intensifies against the centripetal force of the social, “the ethical norms and order that promoted the smooth progress of humanity cannot but be transformed into shackles on that development of humanity [*ingansöng*]. An ethics which arrives at this stage of conflict with humanity has necessarily already lost its...subjectively human truth [*chinsilsöng*]”:

If we refer to “historical rationality” as that which possesses a concretely universal character, the particular split from the universal cannot but become something irrational; if we refer to “human truth” [*chinsilsöng*] as subjective truth [*chuch’ejögin chinsil*] then it would not be wrong to say that a substance broken away from subjectivity—a history disjointed from humankind—would be something *untruthful*. To repeat: an already-existing [social] ethics, as it loses its ethical truth [*chin*], is merely a skeletal ruin bereft of true ethicality. (Sö 1940, 16)¹⁷

Assimilatory colonization involves just such a disjunction between “historically rational” truth and the subjective experience of that truth by both colonized and colonizer. Sö complicates the mediating role of culture by asking in what form this “uncertainty” might be expressed in literature. How might the form and content of the work of art reflect the *conflict* between the social frame and the individual subject? Key to Sö’s theorization of late colonial society is its

organic and dialectical integration of the ethical and the moral, the social and the individual. As we will see, it is finally literature's role to express the "ethical truth" of a particular social formation, the expression of the relationship of the individual to that society. What concept of truth needs to be operative for this statement to make sense? And what for Sō is the relationship between this truth and language, between the expression of truth and the perceived fallibility of the prediscursive fact in late colonial Korea, a time when an unproblematic scientific approach to history and literature had come into question?

From Scientific Fact to Literary Truth

In 1940, Sō asked the readers of *Liberal Arts Critique*—one of two major literary journals in late colonial Korea—whether it was possible for literature to seek after and represent anything less than the truth itself. Opening with the well-known quotation from Aristotle's *Poetics* that distinguishes poetry from history as a mode of understanding, Sō argues that the value of literature as a path toward understanding lies in its capacity to represent truth (*chin*).¹⁸ "The object of understanding [*insik*] is, in general terms, an inquiry into the truth of phenomena [*sasang*]," he writes. "There is, in understanding, no other function apart from the operation of judging and discerning between the truth and falsity of phenomena" (1940, 7).¹⁹

Following the assertion that understanding, whether historical or literary, functions solely to discern between the truth and falsity of objects or events in the world, Sō quickly warns the reader away from a simplistic apprehension of this notion of truth as unilaterally equivalent with what he calls "scientific truth" (*kwahakchōk chilli*), a nomological truth based on objective observation and confirmation by universal principles.²⁰ For Sō, a necessary complement to objective, scientific truth is "literary truth" (*munhakchōk chinsil*). Against the fixed, conceptual form of scientific truth, literary truth presents itself as an experiential truth that returns to the sensory world of the sociolinguistic subject (*chuch'e*) as a source of credibility (Sō 1940, 8). The non-Euclidean geometrical proposition of parallel lines that cross cannot, for instance, be experienced as real (*chinsil*), but the truthfulness (*chilli*) of the proposition cannot be denied.

These two concepts of truth are immanently related—*chilli* and *chinsil* each refer to a truth (*chin*) anterior to discourse, what Sō calls the "truth of actuality" (*sasil ūi chin*). At the same time, this truth (*chin*) is the product of a dialectical movement between objective and subjective truths, the "logical relation of mutual negation and subsumption" (Sō 1940, 9).

Whereas *chilli* as a universal form of truth denies the individuality and contingency of each particular case of experiential *chinsil*, presenting formal concepts of necessary and objective relations that describe and coordinate the multiplicity of subjective realities, *chinsil* negates *chilli*'s abstract universality and returns truth to the realm of subjective actuality, unifying objective truth with the concrete everyday experience of the actuality that it claims to describe. As *chinsil* sublates *chilli*, it presents a higher level of truth that contains the truth of the scientific within itself, elevating abstract truth into a "human truth" (*inganjök chinsil*) in the production of the literary text.

Sō's conceptualization of truth as consisting of a dialectic between objective and subjective elements is clearly a Hegelian one, the replacement of an either/or decision between truth and falsity with an organic unity in which truth supplants falsity, only to be supplanted by a higher truth. What is interesting about Sō's treatment of this dialectic is that it assigns to literature, rather than to philosophy, the responsibility of expressing—carrying out in language—the movement of truth.²¹ The representation of truth falls on the shoulders of the author who must, in his or her writing, practice the unification of the objective concepts that structure the prevailing ethos of his or her time with a depiction of the subjective experience of those customs (*kwanhaeng*)²² that structure everyday life. Nor does the author stand outside of these customs, laws, habits, social norms, and so on—it is precisely his or her involvement in and experience of the life of this period that yields a feeling or sense of morality (*simchǒng*) in the author at odds with the historical essence of his or her era (Sō 1940, 18–19).²³ The author is the figure who is capable of exceeding the mere reflection of reality suggested in Sō's scientific truth and synthesizing that (received) truth with a subjective experience of a complex and contradictory reality.

Truth, in both its subjective and objective manifestations, relates to what is actual (*sasil*), the reality that both preexists and is revealed by the dialectical movement of thought and the expression of that thought in language. Another way to think about Sō's division of truth into two related elements, then, is in terms of the relationship that obtains between those elements and the supposed ontological ground of actuality itself. Scientific knowledge elevates itself above reality, separating itself from every subject and basing its monological, impersonal assertions regarding the truth of the real on formal principles, while experiential knowledge is based on immersion in the everyday, a subjective and dialogical engagement with the real (Sō

1940, 8). Experiential or subjective truth appears in (grammatically) personal statements, while objective truth appears in the form of impersonal propositions, as scientific thought attempts to separate itself from the subjective realm and present the object unhindered by raw experience, emotion, the entanglements of human relationships, and so on.

This latter form of knowing is what Alexandre Kojève calls vulgar science, “carried out by a Subject who pretends to be independent of the Object, and...[that] is supposed to reveal the Object which exists independently of the Subject” ([1969] 1980, 176). Heidegger calls it material truth, “the consonance of something at hand with the ‘rational’ concept of its essence,” which consequently appears as “immediately intelligible” or logical ([1967] 1998, 139). When we speak of truth in general, Heidegger writes, we most often mean the “actual,” a “genuineness” that “is in accordance [*in der Übereinstimmung steht*] with what, always and in advance, we ‘properly’ mean” by whatever it is we are seeking the truth of (137).

While Sō’s argument does not discount a rational order to the world, he identifies both scientific and literary truths as modes of speech: “The expression of [scientific] truth in speech is its appearance through impersonal propositions...while the expression of [subjective] truth in speech is its coming into being through personal propositions” (1940, 8). The difference between scientific and literary truths is thus not one of a material, lawful, necessary truth against a subjective propositional truth, but rather rests in the relationship between types of propositions and the reality they attempt to communicate. While material truth can thus be seen as the accord of “a matter with what is supposed in advance regarding it,” propositional truth lies in “the accordance of what is meant in the statement with the matter” at hand (Heidegger [1967] 1998, 138).²⁴

In positioning both objective and subjective truths in terms of the propositional, Sō highlights the dependence of each form of truth on the other and on language rather than letting the matter rest at a preliminary stage where truth is essentially equated with common sense—an accord with that which is already known to begin with. Both objective and subjective truths potentially reserve an “unsaid” for Sō, something that requires or appears to require interpretation (understanding) to take place. That is, both truths are discursively constituted. On the one hand, if subjective truth is absent from scientific truth, science remains disconnected from actuality; on the other hand, if subjective truth has relinquished all association with the laws

that appear to govern physical or social reality, that subjective truth is equally disconnected from actuality:

Truth [*chilli*] is a truth of actuality; the real [*chinsil*] too is a truth of actuality. Thus *chilli* and *chinsil* cannot but have some necessary immanent relation. To say it again, a truth that does not underwrite the real cannot be a truth of superior meaning; and a real that does not imply a truth cannot be a real of true meaning [*ch'am taun üimi*]. A literary truth [*chinsil*] must at root necessarily correspond with scientific truth [*chilli*] as [modes of] understanding [*insik*] of the same actual [*sasil*]. (Sö 1940, 9)

Scientific and literary truths both function as propositional truths—truths that are “the accordance...of a statement...with a matter” (Heidegger [1967] 1998, 140)—differing only in their stances vis-à-vis an actuality shared between the two modes of understanding. Further, the relationship between fact, truth, and the (subjective) real is a dialectical one: “experiential actuality, scientific truth, and literary truth,” Sö writes, “have a logical relation of mutual negation and subsumption.”²⁵

Sö *Insik* thus provides a theorization of truth that extends the mid-1930s critique of realist discourse and engages in the debates around facticity. He maintains that any representation of the experiential real must imply a kernel of scientific truth, and that while subjective truth and objective truth characterize reality in different ways, it is only in the sublation of these two particular truths that a concretely universal, ethical, “human truth” may be arrived at. In this sense, he insists that material reality (*sasil*) contains the essential truth (*chin*) common to both subjective and objective truths—a prediscursive reality.

At the same time, the dialectical nature of truth necessarily includes the subjective and the role of that subject’s expression. Accordingly, Sö’s discourse on truth can be understood as undermining an empiricist imperial discourse, a discourse confident in technologies of knowing and seemingly unaware of subjective biases and narrative techniques at work in the production of historical, political, biological, and other forms of knowledge. Sö provides us with a philosophical accounting of the dialectical relationship between individual and society or subject and system that is not fundamentally limited to a defense of empire.

In addition, the action of truth here provides a structural homology with the social in Sö’s thought, a formal connection between the individual and the social that brings them together in the ethical. “What is called ‘truth’ [*chin*] in ethics carries the meaning of, precisely, human truth

[*inganjök chinsil*],” Sö writes, “a subjective truth [*chuch’ejök chinsil*]. Isn’t then ‘literary truth,’ after which literature seeks, also this subjective human truth?” “There is thus,” he continues, “no difference between the truth after which literature seeks and ethical truth. To say it again: the object that literature engages is not only moralistic actuality [*illyunchök sasil*] but it seeks as well an ethical truth” (1940, 11–12). What is the role of the intellectual or artist in such a context? When society or culture is split by a radical disjuncture between collective *Sitte* and individual *Moralität*, how is consciousness manifested and understanding reached in a work of art? What can a “human ethics” mean under policies of imperialization in late colonial Korea?

In Crisis, the Ethical Role of Literature

According to Sö, during a period in which social “custom” and individual “feeling” are in perfect harmony, writing will express an author’s own morality; insofar as this coincides with the prevailing social morality, the resulting literature will express the ethical truth of his or her social formation. Such an author would have no reason to be distrustful of the time in which he or she lived.

There would be no reason for a consciousness of one’s eccentric existence [*isimchök saengjon*] with regard to their era to arise in an author with no such skepticism.... In a word, literature’s presentation of the ethical truth of such an era and such a society would perhaps not be as difficult as it is in the present age. (Sö 1940, 15)

Here the homology between the social (the dialectic of *Sitte* and *Moralität*) and the epistemological (the dialectic of *chilli* and *chinsil*) becomes evident in the function of literary language. If the task of literature is to express the truth of one’s era, the author will, in harmonious times, simply express his or her own sense of truth, as this will exist in organic synthesis with social mores. On the other hand, in a “difficult” time, such as the late colonial period, a period of crisis²⁶ when the social has become a “shackles” on humankind, what we see in literature is “a distorted humanity which has lost the balance and harmony of flesh and spirit, psychology [mind] and behavior [*haengdong*], intellect and sentiment, individuality and sociality” (Sö 1940, 17).

Sö depicts modern society as similar to Valéry’s “reign of order”—the “era of fiction” with its “unlimited exercise of speech unrelated to action” (Valéry 1962, 215–219)—but also as

penetrated by a growing instrumentality of life, an encroaching regime of fact. The “surplus” humans of Malraux’s *La Condition Humaine* (1933) and the complex psychology portrayed in Joyce and Proust are “modern human forms,” which one would expect in such a period—“disfigured humans,” “machine-humans” who have lost their individuality or, conversely, an individuality that has lost all relation to the necessities of social life.²⁷ This particularly modern literature exists “as a problem of social ethics ...and originates in the split and distortion of humanity resulting from the contradiction of *Sitte* and *Gemüt*” (Sō 1940, 18), leaving no self-evidential truth available to authors in late colonial Korea and no viable option but to seek an emergent ethics. “The [transitional] ethos of the period is already a particular divided from the universal,” Sō writes, “a history detached from humankind.... [This sort of] simple history, separated from humanity, has lost [its] human truth. To say it again, [it] has lost its truth [*chilli*] objectively at the same time as [it] has lost its truth [*chinsil*] subjectively.” In such a situation, as the author “cannot grasp the true [*chinsil*] of the contemporary through a simple depiction of the prevailing ethos alone” (21), he or she “cannot but seek a new morality, a new ethical truth [*chin*]. As far as the author does not see the given ethics as a self-evident truth, a self-evident ethics, his interests will rightly turn to the creation of a new ethics” (19).

The path toward what Sō calls a “genuine literature” must exceed the standpoint of the prevailing ethos through a critique of that ethos. From this point, he writes, “all the *irony* and *paradox* innate to literature alone will emerge as an acute means of critiquing popular customs [*p’ungsok*].” More than a turn to an ideal past or imagined future, a “panorama” of the modern is required; further, “an author depicting popular customs must always show intelligence and shrewdness in turning his *lens* upon the scene of this acute collusion between human nature and contemporary ethos” (21–22, italicized words indicate where the English term was used in the original text). In short, this is a call to action, or rather, a call to thought in action: when a social system “reaches a period of ... reconstruction, having exceeded the stage of completion and harmony, to the extent that the already-established and fixed social system must be smashed and a new system must be created, action will naturally predominate over consciousness [*kwansang*]” (Sō [1939] 2006, 1:176).²⁸

“When we speak of literature’s ethicality,” Sō concludes, “we speak of literature’s reason for being. The duty of the author must then be to excavate the truth and to safeguard that truth. Yet insofar as the contemporary author might penetrate the truth, he or she cannot but confront

the entangled opposition of contemporary ethos and humanness” (1940, 22). Literature must grapple with and act within this historical struggle in that it takes as its object the human subject; against the natural sciences, literature must assume the role of understanding rather than explaining the volitional individual; and finally, because literary understanding is “necessarily limited by the historical perspective or world view of the person who is doing the understanding,” literature must express how the perceiving subject knows the world and his or her place in it ([1939] 2006, 2:63).

Conclusion

Does Sō’s reconciliation of subjective and objective truths with a particular ethos, “transferring the external demands of the whole into the internal demands of each self, of individual constituents belonging to the whole” (Sō 1940, 13), differ from those promoted under the “total culture” (*chōnch’ejōgin munhwa*) of assimilatory empire? Given that they both appear to take as their goal the harmonization of the social and the individual toward the production of a community, does Sō’s work reflect a colonial discourse that “makes a problem of the cultivation of the individual as constitutive parts of a total culture” (“Munhwa” 1939, 2) and for which culture is a mediating force facilitating the unilateral imposition of truth from the sociopolitical structure to the individual? Can we understand Sō’s work as counter to that of imperial apologists, as appealing to a “universality” beyond East Asia (C. Yi 2006)?

First, it is important to recognize Sō’s careful attention to language, in both the general sense of the discursive basis of truth statements, and in the specific sense of a literary language “eccentric” to its ethos. As we have seen above, Sō’s treatment of objective truth as a linguistic phenomenon undermines science’s claim to a prediscursive factuality. At the same time, he understands the artist as one who expresses the disjunction between the social and the subject—between the ethics of the community and individual morality. This arguably contrasts with imperialist discourse, where it is in a language comprehensible to all that culture must provide the presumed truth of a particular situation. There, an everyday language is brought into coincidence with prevailing objective conditions and functions by “unifying [Koreans] as imperialized citizens, educating and training [them] in spirit, in thought, in feeling” (In 1940, 4). An imperialist literary language mediates a pregiven truth into the affective realm of everyday

communication, where it becomes experienced as common knowledge or common sense, the “matter of fact.”

Second, for Sō the action of “understanding” (as opposed to “knowledge”) takes into account the agency of the subject and the potential for a powerful and ethical literary language to emerge. In a situation of social antagonism, the language of the artist will be “eccentric” to that situation's pragmatic factuality and as a consequence able to work to change the expressible or “known” of that situation.

Third, while it may seem obvious, attention should be drawn to Sō's insistence on a dialectical model that does not necessarily prefigure the coming social formation. This is in contrast to an imperial discourse that enforces the “cultivation of the individual as a constitutive part of total culture” in line with an “accord” that is already known to begin with (see also Ch'ae 2006)—where the desired social order precedes and determines its emergence in subjective consciousness, while the construction of a social whole is understood in positive and particular terms. Sō, rather, understands the process as a series of negations, and as universal.

Sō's late colonial writings on literature can thus be seen as a response to the dilemmas of subjectivity and objectivity in language faced by intellectuals in colonial Korea, situated within a dialectical conceptualization of historical progress. If both scientific and colonial discourses strive toward fixity and identification (of object and subject, respectively), then Sō introduces what Homi Bhabha, following Edward Said, describes as “the counter-pressure of the diachrony of history—change, difference” (Bhabha 1994, 122). Sō's work on colonial literature intervenes in a number of ways in a system of factual representation that, as “a regime of truth,... structurally similar to realism,” produces the colonized “as a social reality which is at once an ‘other’ and yet entirely knowable and visible” (Bhabha 1994, 101): he undermines the “objective truth” of scientific or official discourse, that which seeks “identity, stasis”; locates subjective experience as position of power within a historical-material dialectic; and posits both a subject “eccentric” to the apparent social totality and a form of expression (literature) that, in encompassing both subjective and objective forms of truth particular to that subject's social formation, registers the disjunction or opposition between “official” culture and the subjective experience of that culture.

This can only be speculation on our part, as Sō does not raise the issue of colonial society explicitly, but it is hard to resist understanding Sō's theorization of a literary practice “eccentric”

to its present moment—one that expresses the constitutive disjuncture between a given discourse and subjective experience—as related to a critique of the colonial context and its legitimizing discourse. Sō moves beyond the binary opposition characteristic of his literary historical context, the distinction between the literary text understood as the autonomous product of a subject disengaged from his or her context and the literary text understood as determined by (or a direct correlative of) its historical period or sociocultural context. For Sō an “ethical literature” rests on the idea of literary truth as a dialectical negation of purported scientific objectivity (a method of description that denies the mediating role of language) and the sublation of an abstract universality by the subjective, concrete participation in and depiction of a particular social ethos. In this way Sō provides a subtle critique of two assumptions: first, of the scientific truth behind frequently racialized discourses of empire used to justify ongoing colonization and war, and second, of an instrumentalized literature understood as mediation between the total culture of empire and the systematic production of truth and belief at the experiential level (In 1940). Sō thus understands the importance of language as an object of critique when it functions as a powerful accomplice of identificatory discourse, but also its significance to social transformation, where literature stands not only as the site of the production of truth but also as the potential site of politics.

Christopher P. Hanscom is assistant professor in the Department of Asian Languages and Cultures at the University of California, Los Angeles.

Notes

- 1 Quoted in Seth (2009, 374). Kim Ch’öl’s work on the advent and role of physical anthropology in colonial Korea as an imperial science of race similarly finds that “this racial outlook (which was broadly shared by both the colonizers and the colonized), rather than strengthening and clarifying the boundaries between Japanese and Koreans as initially intended, actually became a source of tension and unease threatening that same ‘boundary’” (2013, 3).
- 2 My thanks to Paul Barclay for pointing me to this article.
- 3 For Thomas, recognition, when “we see and make determinations about what we are seeing before we are conscious of doing so,” is precognitive. Excavation, on the other hand, is an interpretive mode that treats sight itself “as an experience located within historically specific regimes of knowledge” (2009, 152).

- 4 Sō Insik was born in Hamhŭng in 1906 and graduated from the Kyōngsōng Private Central (High) Normal School before studying philosophy at Waseda University (1926–1928), where he acquired “a long-term interest...in the relation between human consciousness and action, and their dialectical synthesis.” He became a practicing Marxist-Leninist and an activist in the Korean Communist Party during the late 1920s and early 1930s before being arrested by colonial authorities in November 1931 and jailed for five years following his trial in 1933. Released in 1937, he began publishing philosophically oriented pieces that evinced a link with Kyoto School philosophers, including Miki Kiyoshi and Nishida Kitarō, and earned the appellation “leading philosopher” in a *Chosŏn ilbo* article in 1940. Soon after this, following an interview with the journal *Chogwang*, Sō ceased writing altogether and confined himself to a private existence. Details about his activities in the postliberation period are mostly unknown, though there is evidence that he participated in several groups formed in the “liberation space” by former members of the leftist Korea Artista Proleta Federatio (KAPF) (Ch’a 2006). Ch’a speculates that Sō went to the North and later fled to the Soviet Union, but it is difficult to confirm any facts from this period.
- 5 Or, per Valéry, “things themselves speaking.” In this sense facticity is a form of realism that elides language or treats it as a transparent medium, as does scientific discourse (see Barthes 1986, 4).
- 6 More than just homophones, each term is realist in the sense that a correlation is implied between (literary, scientific, and historical) language and the object or matter at hand.
- 7 “Perception” here is *insik*, also translatable as “knowing” or “understanding.”
- 8 Or, as Husserl puts it, in considering the role of the subjective in the objective sciences: “fact-minded sciences” exclude the most important questions, the “questions of the meaning of meaningfulness of the whole of this human existence” (1970, 6).
- 9 Valéry’s “century of fact,” as Ch’a points out, was taken out of context and became a commonplace for the “world-historical significance” of the formation of the East Asian order—an omen of civilizational change—imported into Korea through Japan as a sort of slogan (Ch’a 2012, 33).
- 10 Yi is paraphrasing Ryu Chesik (1983, 103).
- 11 In this sense, history is mythical in Valéry’s thought: “To the extent that a historical account contains elements which are not open to verification and which are nevertheless the object of an attitude of belief, the perspective is mythical” (Champigny 1970, 211).
- 12 An Hamgwang (1910–1982) was an early member of KAPF and *wōlbuk* critic (one who “went north” after liberation) who was purged as an anti-Party, antirevolutionary revisionist in 1967 when he opposed the systematization of Juche ideology (H. Yi 2006, 222).
- 13 In keeping with this, Benda writes that “men to-day are displaying, with a hitherto unknown knowledge and consciousness, the desire to situate themselves in the *real* or practical manner of existence, in opposition to the *disinterested* or *metaphysical* manner” (Benda [1928] 2009, 37).
- 14 This leads to a working definition of “facts” as “desires that have been realized,” as with Benda’s assertion (quoting Paul Bourget): “A truly scientific mind feels no need to justify a privilege which appears as an elementary and irreducible datum of the social world” ([1928] 2009, 120n2). Benda points out that it is only when a privilege is threatened (i.e.,

- the fulfilled desire is questioned) that the “scientific mind” feels compelled to justify that privilege.
- 15 Bergson calls this powerful, unseen force “the totality of obligation” and encapsulates its command to the subject in the phrase “You must because you must.” As Slavoj Žižek has it: “We know there is no truth in authority, yet we continue to play its game and to obey it in order not to disturb the usual run of things” (1992, x). Sō explicitly references the Bergsonian “closed society” in his 1940 “Literature and Ethics.”
- 16 Sō later draws on Georg Simmel’s distinction between *Mehr-Leben* (“more-life”) and *Mehr-als-Leben* (“more-than-life”) to develop the idea of the relation between the (universal) human subject and his or her position within a (particular) social context. “More-life” is the process of human reproduction, whereas “more-than-life” rests in the process of creating something beyond simple life (art, religion, law, knowledge), which has a law and logic of its own and which ultimately comes to structure and restrict the raw creative potential of the human being, a form imposed on the content of life (1940, 15). See Simmel ([1918] 2011). It is crucial to note here that for Sō the individual is a social being. As Marx wrote, “His life, even if it may not appear in the direct form of a *communal* life carried out together with others—is therefore an expression and confirmation of *social life*. . . . Man, much as he may therefore be a *particular* individual. . . is just as much the *totality*—the ideal totality—the subjective existence of thought and experienced society present for itself” (1978, 86). This materialist stance, which Sō arguably shares, has often been contrasted with a Hegelian idealism that locates the ethical in the ideal state, “the union of the universal essential will and the subjective will” (Hegel 1988, 41).
- 17 This is in keeping with Sō’s dual vision of history: “History-as-being binds, seizes, in its own terminal system, the continual order [*Reihe*] of history-as-action that always accompanies and takes part in it; and history-as-action accompanies the continuous system of history-as-being, always rupturing it—[thus these two] progress [while coexisting and acting on one another].” History-as-being correlates with “enclosures of tradition, built up over thousands of years”; history-as-action, following Nietzsche, strikes a present-centered stance that gives the “strength to smash the old and create the new” (Sō [1939] 2006, 1:173–175).
- 18 The relevant quotation from Aristotle is: “It is not the function of the poet to relate what has happened, but what may happen—what is possible according to the law of probability or necessity. The poet and the historian differ not by writing in verse or in prose. . . . The true difference is that one relates what has happened, the other what may happen. Poetry, therefore, is a more philosophical and a higher thing than history: for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular” (Aristotle 1951, 35).
- 19 The original text reads: “Sasang ūi chin kwa wi rŭl sikpyŏlhago p’andanhanŭn chagyong ūl ttŏnasŏ insik e pyŏlgae ūi kinŭngi itnŭn kŏsi anida.” (事像의眞과僞를 識別하고 判斷하는 作用을 떠나서 認識에 別個의 機能이 있는것이 아니다) (Sō 1940, 7). “Phenomenon” in its philosophical sense is usually rendered as *hyŏnsang*, which corresponds to Hegel’s *Erscheinung*; *sasang* could also be translated here as “object” or “event.”

- 20 Sŏ's treatment of "scientific truth" or knowing resembles Hegel's concept of "understanding" (*Verstand*), which suggests the abstract, formal thought of the empirical sciences. "The defect of the Understanding," writes T. M. Knox in his foreword to Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*, "is that while it correctly distinguishes between form and content, essential and inessential, universal and particular, it fails to synthesize these opposites. Held apart from one another, however, each of these opposites becomes an abstraction, and the living whole of reality has not been explained but explained away and killed by being so analysed into its constituents. What the Understanding fails to recognize is that a 'thought' is not something empty or abstract; it is a determinant, a determinant of itself" (Knox 1967, viii). Sŏ treats the gap between thought and action at length in "Action and Consciousness in History" ([1939] 2006, 1:173–189).
- 21 Literature is here more than a vehicle for the revelation of a truth that preexists its apprehension in language. For Sŏ, ethical truth is produced in language, in the application of language to the experience and description of a particular social ethos and its contradictions, distortions, and so on. In this sense the "movement of truth" is the production of truth in language—Sŏ finds truth to be a characteristic not only of phenomena but of knowledge as well.
- 22 Sŏ uses the term *kwanhaeng* to represent the particular popular customs and conventions of a period, rather than *kwansŭp*, which signifies a universal or communal ethics (*Sittlichkeit*). Sŏ is here taking part in larger debates centered on the question of the (personal, communal, or temporal) specificity of literature that occupied intellectual circles in late 1930s and early 1940s Korea.
- 23 Sŏ also refers to this sense in the author as a "mentality" or "spirit" (*chŏngsin*). Here we see an objectivity arising not from the correct depiction of objects in the world, but through the expression of the organizing structure of a particular society.
- 24 Heidegger locates these two commonplace forms of truth in the formulations *veritas est adaequatio rei et intellectus* (truth is the correspondence of the matter to knowledge) and *veritas est adaequatio intellectus ad rem* (truth is the adequation of intellect to thing). He goes on to show that the former is ultimately a theological explanation, with "knowledge" as the divine plan of creation (supplanted more recently by a "world order," or "worldly reason") against which matter must be measured (1967, 138–139).
- 25 In the remainder of the essay, Sŏ works toward a description of the relationship between literature and society. In short, literature functions according to the subjective morality (*Moralität*) of the author, which, in periods where the prevailing ethos stands at odds with the practice and experience of everyday life, comes into conflict and dialectical interaction with that ethos and works to produce a new ethical community (*kwansŭp*, G. *Sittlichkeit*) through its critical apprehension of actuality. It is important to note that Sŏ is not writing of absolute truth but of local, temporary truth, specific to its era and society—a truth still caught up in the dialectic of history that "remains 'true' as long as a new philosophy, also 'true,' does not come along to demonstrate its 'error'" (Kojève [1969] 1980, 184).
- 26 See Hanscom (2013), especially chapter 1, on theories of crisis utilized by literary critics across the ideological spectrum to describe the social and discursive contexts faced by writers and intellectuals in colonial Korea.

- 27 Expanding on the relationship between social form and individual type in periods of transition, Sō writes that “the mind of human beings living within this sort of daily life, particularly with regards to the psychology of the author, will have a great interest in and excessive fondness for incompleteness over completion, imbalance over balance, a loss of stability over stability, movement over stillness, risk over moderation, illness over health” (Sō 1940, 17–18). Here again Sō engages with debates among critics of the period, such as Im Hwa, Ch’oe Chaesō, An Hamgwang, and Kim Namch’ōn, over the relationship between the author, literature, and sociopolitical reality.
- 28 Sō uses different terms for “behavior,” within social codes or boundaries (*haengdong*), and “action,” which breaks with or operates outside of standards and norms (*haengwi*) ([1939] 2006, 1:178).

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