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Literary Censorship during Japanese Colonial Rule and the Need for Comparative Study

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# CROSS-CURRENTS



## EAST ASIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE REVIEW

READINGS FROM ASIA

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**Mansu HAN, “Literary Censorship during Japanese Colonial Rule and the Need for Comparative Study,” *Bigyo munhak*, vol. 41 (2007).**

### **Abstract:**

This article discusses literary censorship in the southern regions of Korea under Japanese colonial rule. It looks at the potential contributions censorship study can make to the research of modern Korean literature; examines research trends in literary censorship study in southern Korea and other regions under the colonial rule of the former Japanese Empire (China, Japan, Taiwan, and the northern regions of Korea); and points to future directions for literary censorship study.

During Japanese colonial rule, all printed material in Korea and elsewhere in the empire was censored by the colonial police before publication. Even after the 1945 collapse of the empire, South Korea maintained a prepublication censorship system, which was not lifted until the end of the 1980s. Therefore, it can be argued that modern Korean literature was not so much *freely written* as *approved*. Most researchers focus on studying only existing written texts and, thus, tend to limit the scope of their research to literature that was approved. Published guidelines concerning censorship (albeit incomplete) can also help us understand what was *restricted*. In other words, there are two types of written texts for study, both those that were approved and those that were restricted, but most literary study so far has focused only on the former.

This situation raises questions about authors’ *original intentions*. The fact that most of the originally intended messages do not exist in written form is a key issue that needs to be

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addressed to provide a more comprehensive understanding of modern Korean literature. This article proposes that authors' original intentions should be a new subject of study for modern Korean literature. In other words, the existing written texts of Korean literature should be considered to comprise only works with approved messages, as a result of the constant struggle of original intention against restrictions. In this way, the article criticizes the current study of modern Korean literature for focusing on only one of three potential sources, which has led to limited accomplishment in the field.

But how can we study original intended messages that never made it into written form and have thus disappeared? While there is no way to fully recover an author's original intention, the use of inference is still illuminating. By cross-checking the two types of written texts described above and studying other supplementary materials (e.g., memoirs of authors and interviews), we can gain a clearer picture of authors' original intentions. In particular, restoration (*K. bokja*, *J. fuseji*) is the key to unlocking the hidden texts by bringing all the clues together. For example, "Salt," a short story by Gyeongae Gang, was censored, with the end of the story blacked out with ink and nearly illegible. However, working with the National Forensic Service, the author of this article was able to restore most of the text to its original state. Collecting and analyzing such materials and data can enhance our understanding of Korean literature produced during periods of strict censorship.

Research on literary censorship is not very advanced in the regions colonized by the former Japanese Empire. South Korea and Japan have undertaken slightly more censorship study than their neighbors, most of whom do not have advanced research programs on this topic (possibly because some countries still have censorship systems in place.) While Japan primarily focuses on postwar censorship (i.e., GHQ, or General Headquarters, censorship), South Korea's focus is on censorship during Japanese colonial rule, when the leading authority of censorship was the colonial power rather than the national government. It is notable that censorship study in Japan is primarily concerned with the period of American occupation. This suggests that Japan is ignoring its own role as an oppressor by focusing only on the damage it suffered as a victim. If censorship study is disproportionately focused on the victim's side, it runs the risk of further intensifying the new type of nationalism that was shaped after the imperial age. For censorship study to shed light on what happens when freedom of expression is suppressed and, indeed,

make a meaningful contribution to the expansion of freedom of expression, we need to focus more on the censorship currently in place at the national level. In this context, it is encouraging that the Society of Censorship Study, founded in 2004 by researchers of Korean Studies,<sup>i</sup> is leading various academic events in and out of Korea (e.g., at the 2005 Association for Asian Studies annual meeting) to help expand the scope of censorship study and stimulate international cooperative research activity. It is also significant that Korean academics are leading the censorship study in Korea, since most research on modern Korean literature has so far been highly dependent on theories imported from the West.

The author suggests that there are four requirements for the meaningful development of censorship study. First, the time frame of the study should be expanded. A comparative study of censorship in the premodern and modern eras is needed, particularly of censorship led by the national government. Considering the trend of abolishing government censorship, researchers should also focus more attention on the new type of censorship by capital. Second, researchers need to expand the concept of censorship itself. While attention is currently focused on physical censorship systems, it should be expanded to cover more sophisticated types of censorship in light of Freudian theory or the field theory of Bourdieu. Third, more interdisciplinary study is needed, such as the study of censorship under way in Korea that combines journalism and literature. Cooperative research involving sociology, bibliography, political science, and cultural studies can lead to a more comprehensive understanding of censorship.

Fourth, censorship researchers need to foster international comparative study. The subject of literature and censorship under Japanese colonial rule extends beyond any single country's borders and therefore requires international cooperation; without it, the research will be severely limited. With the expansion of the former Japanese empire, its censorship system expanded as well, eventually covering Okinawa, Taiwan, Korea, Manchuria, mainland China, and even Southeast Asian countries. The fundamental purpose of censorship in the Japanese Empire was to share information between the censorship authorities, while blocking any channel of communication between the censored, and to thereby control the public opinion of the entire empire more efficiently. Going further, the censorship of the Japanese Empire should be studied in relation to the censorship systems of other imperial powers, including the United Kingdom, Germany, France, and the United States.

The international comparative study of censorship is required for the following three reasons. First, it can help data collection. One of the challenges with censorship study is the shortage of data. Authorities have always kept censorship-related materials out of the public domain, and the remaining data has generally been destroyed whenever there was a change of power. As the data is so incomplete, researchers need to work with a collage of data from multiple sources and different countries. Second, it is essential for a comparative study of the various censorship systems themselves. One of the key characteristics of censorship of the empire was the distinction between the homeland and colonies, as well as between colonies themselves. Studying the similarities and differences between various censorship systems, as well as their respective intentions and performances, can help researchers understand the overall censorship structure of the empire. Lastly, it is essential for better literary education. As most of the literature of the colonized regions was distorted by censorship, simple translation of the censored texts will not help foreign readers fully understand the literary work of the time, particularly because many of those readers are likely to have poor knowledge of the countries' histories. In such cases, setting up the context by providing additional information on censorship should help. It is advisable to translate the uncensored original text when possible (e.g., the original text of "Salt" with the blacked-out end recovered) or to add comments. Translations of uncensored versions along with censored copies can help general readers understand works more fully in the context of censorship during Japanese colonial rule. In addition, researchers can benefit from more efficient comparison between censorship in their own countries and elsewhere, which will further advance the field.

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*Note*

<sup>i</sup> The founders include Keunsik Jeong at Seoul National University, Kyeonghi Choe (Kyeong-hee Choi) at the University of Chicago, Heonho Pak at Korea University, Gihyeong Han at Sungkyunkwan University, and Mansu Han at Dongguk University.