ASIEN 154/155 (Januar/April 2020), S. 53–65

Refereed article

The Politics of Remembrance and the Remembrance of Politics in Yisang's Poetry

Marion Eggert

Abstract: Yisang (1910–1937), one of the most renowned and best-studied poets of Korea's colonial period, is usually remembered as a bohemian, as an intoxicated master of modernist language games. But a close reading of the poetologically charged poems with which Yisang introduced himself to his audience as a Korean-language poet in July 1933 reveals that the engagement with Korean history and identity took center place in his own view of his poetical endeavors. However, different from more simple-minded nationalist authors, Yisang recognized the double-edged quality of "history" and "nation" — constituting both a treasure and a burden. It is argued that this complication of the "love for the nation" instigated by his poetry has been one of the reasons why the political layer of Yisang's poetry has kept being forgotten — notwithstanding repeated rediscoveries — in the scholarship in recent decades. More than anything, it is his distrust of a celebratory politics of remembrance that makes a celebratory remembrance of Yisang's politics so difficult.

Keywords: politics of remembrance, Yisang, political implications in avantgarde poetry, forgetfulness in scholarship

Marion Eggert is professor of Korean Studies at Ruhr University Bochum. Her main fields of inquiry are the intellectual and literary history of Late Chosŏn and early modern Korea.
marion.eggert@rub.de, ORCID: 0000-0003-0802-2725

Introduction

"Politics of Remembrance" is a field of inquiry most often surveyed in terms of space and visual culture" monuments, parks, museums, shows. In the textual arena, emphasis is mostly placed on school textbooks. There is probably no particular need to argue for the importance of including textual studies, especially of the literary arts, among the objects of inquiry of the politics of remembrance; however, practice of this seems to be lagging behind. One reason for this may lie in the lack of specificity in the use of texts for remembrance politics: Since writing is by and large a mnemotechnic practice, each and every text may be said to in some way contribute to sorting out what may be forgotten and what is to be remembered — and if the latter, in which way.

While architecture and parks can be created for purely utilitarian purposes, thus making it possible to single out those items that are specifically meant to manipulate collective memory, the latter is far more difficult when it comes to literary texts. A politics of remembrance approach to such texts should therefore be seen not as a tool for identifying those that "treat" or incorporate a politics of remembrance, but as a method that emphasizes a specific layer of significance common to all literary texts — in the same way as, for example, a Gender Studies approach, the relevance of which does not hinge on whether a text explicitly addresses gender issues. However, as can also be seen from the precedent of Gender Studies, as long as this specific approach has not yet been established as a common feature of the interpretive toolbox, awareness of this layer of texts needs to be heightened by pointing out the topicality of cultural memory in those where this element has tended to be overlooked. This is what the present essay attempts to do with the poetry of an author who specifically lends himself to this endeavor, since the political dimension of his works may be said to be in (constant) need of (re)discovery.

Yisang scholarship: A brief history of forgetfulness

The colonial-era poet Yisang[1] (1910–1937) has long been regarded as an apolitical author. To this day, he is seen as the prototype of the avant-gardist in Korean literary history — as devoted to a rather hermetic brand of modernism, to experimentation with visual effects and sophisticated but self-referential language games. In a tradition of literary historiography that tends to subsume authors under the categories of either "engaged" or "pure" literature, Yisang is usually understood to fall on the far end of the latter side of the spectrum. Chris Hanscom's (2013) pathbreaking book *The Real Modern* has been of great help in breaking apart this ossified dichotomy

1 Yisang was the poet's self-chosen nom de plume (his "real" name being Kim Haegyŏng). Since "Yisang" amply puns on a number of words in the Korean language pronounced *isang*, while at the same time purporting to be a proper name (surname Yi, given name Sang), I write the name as one word while retaining the transcription Yi for the first syllable (which would in regular words be simply transcribed as "i"). For a discussion of some of the homonyms of *isang* and their relationship to Yisang, see Eggert (2005: 5–6).

and seeing "modernist" colonial writers as intellectuals who engaged in their own way with the colonial reality, rather than outright ignoring it. However, scholarship on Yisang — whom Hanscom does not turn attention to — has yet to catch up with such more context-sensitive ways of reading the colonial modernists. To be sure, attempts have been made to free Yisang's literary work from the "modernist" frame of reception — in Western languages most notably by Henry Em (1995: 52–65), who in his dissertation provides a sufficiently persuasive "nationalist" reading of Yisang's most famous short story, "Wings" ("Nalgae").

The case Em is making for reading the story on an allegorical level, which — as he argues — must have been rather obvious for the poet's contemporaneous readers, renders Yisang a far less aloof, interiority-centered writer than his later-day reception would have him be. Others have followed suit in excavating the political dimension of further prose writings by the poet (Yi Chŏngsŏk 2009). Concerning his poetry, acknowledgement of its political implications can be found here and there (e.g. Yi Chŏngsŏk 2002; Gardner 2005). Kevin Smith offers a brief overview of the respective literature, and once more argues that we need to understand Yisang's work "not as a retreat from colonial history but as nuanced engagement with it" (2016: 135). However, it is still common among contemporary readers to refrain from allowing for a "meaning outside of the text" (Sone 2016: 196) in Yisang's poetry. And even readings that do reckon with a political dimension tend to discover it on an — I would argue — overly abstract level, given the common fascination with Yisang's experimental language use and, especially, with visuality as both motif and literary practice in his poetry (Shin 2002; Kim 2018).

New poetry for the nation: A reading of Yisang's earliest Korean-language poetry

In the following pages, I will offer a more straightforward reading of a few items of Yisang's poetic art. The main textual basis is the three poems published in the journal *Kat'ollik ch'ŏngnyŏn* ("Catholic youth") in July 1933, Yisang's earliest-published poetry in the Korean language. My claim is that engagement with the colonial situation of Korea is part and parcel of the poetics laid out in these poems, with which he introduced himself as a poet to an expressly Korean-language readership. Before that, he had published Japanese-language poetry in the periodical *Chōsen-to kenchiku* (*Korea and Architecture*) under his original name Kim Haegyŏng throughout the year 1931, and some other Japanese language poems under his pen name Yisang in 1932. Even earlier, in 1930, a Korean-language novel titled "12wŏl 12il" (*December 12*) had been serialized in the magazine *Chosŏn* (published by the Government General) under the name Yisang. The pieces were all there, so to speak,

yet the Korean-language poet Yisang emerged only with this first publication in *Kat'ollik ch'ŏngnyŏn*.[2]

The three poems in question are titled "Konnamu" ("Flowering Tree"), "Irŏn si" ("Such a Poem") and "1933, 6, 1" respectively. I regard neither the fact that these three poems were published together nor the order in which they appear in the magazine as fortuitous, but take them as constituting a poetological statement in three parts.[3] I first offer a translation and discussion of each of these poems.

> Flowering Tree
>
> In the middle of the field there is a flowering tree All around not a single flowering tree As if ardently longing for the flowering tree he has in mind the flowering tree is ardently in bloom. The flowering tree is not able to go to the flowering tree he has in mind Wildly I ran off As if doing it for the sake of one flowering tree I really did such strange Yisang-like mimicry

As this translation emphasizes, the last sentence "audializes"[4] the poet's nom de plume through a homonymous adjective; in Korean, the sentence reads: "*Na-nŭn ch'am kŭrŏn isang-sŭrŏun sungnae-rŭl naeyŏsso*." *Isang* is obviously used here as an adjective meaning "strange, peculiar, odd." However rather than simply saying "*isang-han sungnae*" ("a strange mimicry"), Yisang uses the verb *sŭrŏpta*, "be like," for affixing the adjective (*isang*) to the following noun (*sungnae*, i.e. *hyungnae*). With *sŭrŏpta* being normally used to create adjectives from nouns, *isang-sŭrŏpta* is thus clearly meant to echo Yisang's own name. The mimicry is both strange and Yisang-like; and since Yisang is not so much a person (whose name would be Kim Haegyŏng) but a poet, the "mimicry" must refer to literary practice — mimesis, but a strange, Yisang-like, and thus an idiosyncratic one. It is apparent then that this poem is, at least on one level, a poetological statement.

Mimesis — the poetic act — is done "for the sake of one flowering tree," a solitary flowering tree that the reader has witnessed "ardently" but vainly in bloom. Trees flower in order to exchange their genetic information; in the framework of botanical knowledge of the early twentieth century, blooming was understood as their main or even only mode of communication. However, the flowering of the tree is not just an answer to nature's call: the tree flowers not "because of" but "as if" longing for its beloved other. Its flowering is thus a mimesis of its own, the representation of a

2 A good place to corroborate these dates is Kwŏn Yŏngmin (2009: 391f.). There we also learn that Kim Haegyŏng used the nickname "Yisang" already at the time of his graduation from technical high school in 1928 (Kwŏn 2009: 391). Shin Hyŏngch'ŏl seems to be oblivious to these facts when he argues that "Kim Haegyŏng changed into Yisang [only in 1932]" (2002: 346). However, I concur with Shin (2002: 347) in his emphasizing that the 1933 poems mark a new step in Yisang's self-understanding as a writer.

3 I lack access to the original publication in *Kat'ollik ch'ŏngnyŏn*. Trusting the editorship of Kwŏn Yŏngmin (2009) and Kim Chuhyŏn (2009), who both reprint the three poems in this order, I assume that this is also the order in which they appeared in the magazine.

4 That is, "makes audible, brings into an auditive structure" — analogous to what "visualize" refers to in relation to vision.

potential — and not necessarily actual — feeling; in other words, a creative act. Yet, the act remains futile: being isolated, the flowering tree exerts its creative and communicative potential to no avail.

At this point, the lyrical I comes into play. Running off wildly, the lyrical persona transposes the longing of the tree into action, stasis into movement, and, by extension, isolation into communication. Yet, again, this action is not what it seems: the lyrical I does not act for the sake of the tree but "as if" for the sake of the tree. The "running" of the lyrical I is not suited to actually breaking the isolation of the flowering tree. At the same time, "for the sake of one flowering tree" reveals that the last line does not speak of a "mimicry" of the flowering tree; it must be of something else that is not in the text. We are here referred to "a meaning outside of the text," and enter, perhaps, the realm of speculation.

If my paraphrasing of the poem is not off the mark, however, a number of indicators point in a certain direction. The poet speaks of an isolated entity that seeks a form of communication but is unable to achieve it, and of himself as acting intensely in order to set this communication in motion. While the flowering tree is described as still standing (present tense), the I's own actions are set in the past tense; and by *isang-sŭrŏun*, the poet points to his own poetic identity. What he refers to is, then, the poetic action he already took in the past, that is, the poems he had published in *Chōsen-to kenchiku* (not necessarily only those that he published under the pen name Yisang). These early poems, some of which later appeared as part of the famous *Ogamdo* series in the Korean language, mostly already partake of the experimental nature that disturbed so greatly the Korean readers who came across *Ogamdo* in their daily newspaper.[5]

Japanese society, however, was better attuned to modernist expression, and Yisang had certainly received some of his inspiration from Japanese-language publications. Whatever it is that "mimicry" points to exactly — the poetic process at large, or the appropriation of poetic forms derived from other language communities, or both — , Yisang seems to be explaining here to his Korean-language readers what drives him to write this kind of poetry: the urge to pull himself and something beyond himself (the flowering tree) out of isolation, the urge to communicate. He also lets the readers know that this communication is artistic ("as if") and that it is about something: the flowering tree has an "Other" in mind, and the mimicry is also a mimesis. In brief, the poem attests to the poet's aspiration to create poetic art abreast with the times — and to the fact that this is not meant as art for art's sake, but as the communication of "ardent" issues.

5 Yisang published a series of his poems under the joint title *Ogamdo* (*Crow's Eye Perspective*) in *Chosŏn chungang ilbo* between July 24 and August 8, 1934. The series was intended to run to 30 poems, but had to be cut off after number 15 due to readers' adverse reactions.

Such a Poem

While digging the earth for the sake of construction a large rock was extracted that upon closer look made me think I had seen it before The witness-bearers carried it away on their shoulders and seemed to have cast it off somewhere so I went looking for it at an extremely dangerous place at the side of a main road

That night soft rain fell so the rock must have been washed clean I went to see it next day but what malicious turn of events it was nowhere to be found Some rock must have come and carried it away on its back With this miserable thought in mind I wrote the following composition.

> "You whom I have loved so much I will not forget you for all my life. While I know that I will never attain your love I will stubbornly think of you. Well then remain ever so pretty"

Some rock seemed to look at me blankly I wish to just tear to pieces such a poem

Again, discussion of this poem needs to start with an explanation of puns. First, it must be noted that, like in "Flowering Tree," the poem's language is mostly pure Korean, with only a few Sino-Korean words. In "Flowering Tree," the latter are all written in Chinese characters (with the exception of *saenggak-hada*, "think of, long for," which is Koreanized to the extent that its meaning is somewhat removed from the literal Chinese sense). The same is *almost* true for this poem, with the exception of one-and-a-half words. The half-word is the second part of the word translated here as "miserable," *ch'ŏryang,* commonly written 凄凉 but here appearing as 悽량. Just as the character used by Yisang is distinguished from the "correct" character only by its radical ("heart" instead of "ice"), using the "heart"-*ch'ŏ* carries only a fine nuance of semantic difference. Like the compound, 悽 also means "sad, miserable" — perhaps with the added aspect of "disquieted." If the way of writing *ch'ŏryang* is not a mistake that occurred in the printing process, I can think of only two reasons for it: emphasizing the "heart-mind" as the locus of the "sadness" [6] or, more plausibly, hinting at the extreme care with which characters are chosen — or omitted — in this poem.

The one exceptional word, meanwhile, is found at the very beginning of the poem, *yŏksa*, here translated as "construction" since this is the apparent meaning on the semantic surface of the text. In ordinary speech, however, *yŏksa* would first be understood as "history" until the context teaches one otherwise. Why not disambiguate the word with the respective Chinese characters (*hanja*), given that they are being used in the poem for completely unambiguous words like "dangerous" (*wihŏm*)? Obviously, the ambiguity is intended.[7] The poem is consequently to be

6 The "correct" characters for *ch'ŏryang*, connoting "coldness," would point to physicality rather than the intellect as the origin of that emotion.

7 One may argue that the word is already disambiguated by its verbal use (*yŏksa-hada*, "doing construction"), which is not possible for "history." Yet with *yŏksa* being the first word of the poem, one's initial thought upon reading it would inevitably be of "history."

read with the subtext "history" in mind. And, indeed, such an understanding serves as a key that unlocks comprehension of the otherwise somewhat hermetic text.

The "rock" that is unearthed "in order to do history" (or the construction of history?) must be part of this history, an entity within this history — an entity that was once known ("I had seen it before"), but had by now become hidden from view. But before anything can be done with the rediscovered "rock" it is carried away by *mokto-tŭl*, usually understood by Yisang's interpreters as *mokto-kkun*, "pole-bearers" — again in line with the surface meaning of the text, even though the *-kkun* must be interpolated for the sake of smooth reading. *Mokto* alone, however, as a Sino-Korean word would mean "witness" (which is why I have translated it as "witness-bearers"). The witnesses to the excavation discard the object of discovery. They do so at a roadside that is characterized as the "extremely dangerous" side of a "main road." Why dangerous? We do not receive any explanation, so the reason must reside in what we know: the fact that the road is a main one. The object is there for everyone to see, and that is where the danger lies. Being so exposed, the "rock" is carried away by another "rock" — another entity in history. It is unavoidable by now to see an allegorical meaning in the process: Korean identity or nationhood carried off by another nation.

Bereft of the beautiful, sturdy, but hidden object that this Korean-ness was, what is the lyrical I — the witness among witnesses — to do? What the narrated I in the poem does is write a "composition" that sounds like the stereotypical letter penned by a rejected lover. Formulaic, melancholy, and languid, this "composition" is a testimony to resignation and thus earns only the "blank" look of the "rock." It will remain utterly inconsequential. This is why "such a poem" can only be torn to pieces.

If, as I assume, this poem is the second part of Yisang's self-introduction as a Korean-language poet, the poetological implications are rich and rather obvious. What Yisang is telling his readers is that he is as deeply concerned with Korean community, identity, and nationhood as anyone else. Be it conceived of as a flowering tree or as a beautiful rock (and there are of course differences between the two: the tree, I would submit, points more to the community aspect, the rock more to "hardened" identity factors), that which has been expropriated by the colonizer is to him an object of love, longing, and consideration. However, in his eyes, writing the expectable love letter to the nation is of no use. Yisang may well have had in mind the ubiquity of unnamed "lovers" (*nim*), easily deciphered as allegories of the nation in much Korean poetry of the 1920s, be it in the works of Kim Ŏk (1893–?), Kim Sowŏl (1902–1935), or Han Yongun (1879–1944). Stating once more what everyone knows, he seems to be saying, is stale and tasteless, as well as ineffective. In his eyes, the "tradition" of anticolonial Korean-language poetry that had emerged in the 1920s needed to be revamped.

1933, 6, 1

> A man who has lived for some thirty years on top of a pair of scales (a certain scientist) a man who has counted off thirty thousand or more stars (likewise) a man who has had the brass to live as a human for seventy no for twenty-four years (I)
>
> I have on this day inserted into my autobiography an autographed death announcement After this my body dwelled no longer in such a native place Because it was too difficult witnessing with my own eyes the confiscation of my own poems

The date providing the title for this poem has not been identified by the Yisang scholarship with any specific event in the poet's life, nor is it known as carrying any special significance in Korean history. Since the three poems were published just one month later, it is probable that this was the date of the composition of the poem — or perhaps even the date the manuscript was delivered to the editors of *Kat'ollik ch'ŏngnyŏn*. At any rate, readers must have assumed then as now that the date is intricately linked to Yisang's own creative process. It thus reinforces what is easily detected in this poem anyhow: that it contains a poetological message. Or more precisely: a declaration of a poetic turn.

As an "autographed death announcement," the poem announces the end of a persona that is described in the poem's first paragraph in three steps. Concerning this point, I fully concur with the interpretation offered by Shin (2002: 346f.) that the "scientist," and the "likewise" man, are identical to the final "I." Shin argues that the three words in parentheses can be read as one phrase: "A scientist [who is] also me" (2002: 346). Even without this interpretational device, the array of nominal phrases creates the impression of a movement toward the "I" that concludes the paragraph.[8]

What are the features of this discarded "I"? The "scientist" of the first phrase may point to Yisang's technical-scientific education, but the behavior itself does not connote scientific inquiry. Living "on top of a pair of scales" rather conjures up the image of a person performing a difficult balancing act (i.e. walking a tightrope), suspended in the air between scales or standards pointing in different directions. It is a life occupied with the avoidance of tipping the scales in a way that could make one lose one's footing.

Counting off the stars may signify a tedious, stupefying occupation, as Shin Hyŏngch'ŏl (2002: 347) thinks. Even more pointedly, I would read this as referring

---

8 Kwŏn Yŏngmin regards the two first phrases as references to famous scientists and associates the reference to scales with Newton's law on gravity and the star-counting with Galileo (Kwŏn 2009: 31). Given the somewhat negative nuance transmitted by "living on top of a pair of scales" and "counting off stars" this reading carries little plausibility for me. Pak Sangsun (2019: 373) identifies the star-counting scientist as Edward C. Pickering who, according to Pak, had published a catalogue of over 22,000 stars in 1924 (but note that Pickering died in 1919). Yisang may well have been aware of the star-cataloguing feat conducted at Harvard University. However, understanding of his poem does not hinge on the identity of any concrete scientist he may have had in mind.

to a loss of one's visions: the stars, signifiers of far-away dreams, are rendered objects of calculation and accounting. Finally, we have an I that at the age of twenty-four[9] is indistinguishable from an old man. The "I" to be discarded is characterized by extreme social circumspection or inhibition (living on top of the scales), by a loss of future-oriented visions, and by emaciation/emasculation.

Does all this point only to the bourgeois self that Yisang is about to part with, in order to devote himself to a bohemian, creative life (Shin 2002: 347)? There could be more to it. "Youth," it must be remembered, was one of the catchphrases of early twentieth-century Korean intellectuals hoping to safeguard the nation. "Youth" signified the ability to ingest and act upon new knowledge, and to turn the wheel of history in a new direction. The precariousness of "living on top of a pair of scales," the disillusionment of "counting off the stars," and lost vigor all remind us more of the specifically colonial rather than just of the bourgeois subject.

This more political reading of the first paragraph is reinforced by two elements in the second one. First, it is "such a native place" (*kŭrŏn kohyang*) from which the poet withdraws his body by putting his old "I" to rest. How would this fit in with the narrative of the poet freeing himself from the shackles of employee life? Rather, we may infer that "such a native place" is the home country that has been deprived of bold, assertive action, of space for motion (rather than living on top of a pair of scales), of visions for the future, and of the potential for self-development. Second, Yisang speaks of witnessing the "confiscation" (*ch'aap*) of his own poetry. The frame of reference here is not the inability to write poetry due to the boring duties of a clerk; rather, the term signifies a seizure by force of something that already exists, decidedly pointing to the realm of the political.

To the best of my knowledge, Yisang's poetry had never been censored at the point in time when this poem was published. If he speaks of witnessing "confiscation," he must be referring then to a reading of his poetry that goes against the grain of his own intended purposes, to a process of misappropriation. Considering that the poetry he had published up to this point was all in the Japanese language, it immediately suggests that what was at stake here was the language issue: that his poetry, because it was written in Japanese, was being understood as the utterance of a pacified, well-adapted colonial subject.[10] The "death announcement" concerning this well-behaved colonial subject can be read as a declaration of war on, or at least of independence from, colonial subjugation.[11]

Taken together, the three poems through which Yisang introduced himself as a Korean-language modernist poet unfurl a clearly legible poetic program. While

9 Yisang's actual age in 1933 according to Korean reckoning.

10 Pak Sangsun (2019: 375) offers an interpretation akin to but not exactly similar to my own: he suggests that "confiscation" refers to the fact that *Chŏsen-to kenchiku* printed Yisang's poems under the rubric "Miscellanies," thus depriving them of their literary worth.

11 This is not to say that Yisang's earlier Japanese-language poetry is devoid of political connotations. On this point, see Kim Taeung (2017).

"Flowering Tree" explains the poetic impulse and motivation (as being engendered by the national predicament), the remaining two poems clarify against which options Yisang turned in his own poetic choices: "Such a Poem" dismisses the declarative nationalism rampant in the Korean-language lyrical scene as shallow, while "1933, 6, 1" deals with the danger of pure art's assimilation into the colonial system.

Yisang's poetry and the politics of remembrance/forgetfulness

It would be wrong, however, to read these poems as just a poetology *ex negativo*. They do contain a solid centerpiece: the rock unearthed while "doing construction/history." Whereas the love letter addressing the rock is ridiculed, the (somehow) loving recognition of the rock is not. Remembrance and creating memories of what it means to be Korean in a system set up to abolish precisely this memory is what is being pointed to by the poems, as the hard core of the poetic endeavor that they circumscribe. Needless to say, such remembrance is truly political in function.

Yet, the kind of memory work that Yisang is doing in his poetry is radically different from state-driven or organizational politics of remembrance. Rather than feeding into nationalism, it gnaws at the latter's foundations. The "history" or "identity" unearthed by Yisang is far removed from the heroic history or beatification of tradition that public politics of remembrance usually aim at. Through relentless introspection and acute observation, he commits to cultural memory unsettling questions rather than confident answers: questions, that is, about the relationship of the individual to a´the community into which they are born, to which they are obliged, which puts them in a position that they can neither flee from nor accept, and to which they are bound by both love and hatred. To him, "history" and "nation" are a liability at least as much as an object of loyalty.

This claim could easily be illustrated by one of the most famous specimens of Yisang's poetry, "Poem No. 2" of the *Ogamdo* series. Here the lyrical I finds itself engrossed by a never-ending series of fathers and forefathers that he can never escape, however hard he may try to "jump over" them.[12] Another example that readily comes to mind in the context of an inquiry into the politics of remembrance is the poem titled, fittingly, "Ordinary Commemoration" (*Pot'ong kinyŏm),* published in July 1934 (i.e. contemporaneously with the *Ogamdo* poems), which "commemorates" in its last line not any specific event but the fact itself of "the earth having come full circle" (*chigu-ŭi kongjŏn il chu*) — thus reducing "commemoration" to absurdity. I will give in full one example, however, that may be especially relevant because of its reverberations with "Such a Poem": the second-to-last poem of the (published) *Ogamdo* series.

12 In this poem, the burdensomeness of history/tradition is obvious. For one among many interpretations that have pointed this out, even comparing Yisang's stance on this matter with Nietzsche's refusal of original sin, see Kim Ch'ohŭi (2006: 108).

Poem No. 14

In front of the old city wall is a meadow on the meadow I left my hat. On the city wall I tied my memory to a heavy stone and threw it off as far as I could. The sad sound of history running counter to the flight parabola. Suddenly I saw from above by the wall next to my hat a beggar standing like a village pole. The beggar under the wall is towering over me. Or he might be the specter of unified history. The depths of my hat that I had placed facing emptiness call for the desperate sky. All of a sudden the beggar lowers his shivering frame and throws a stone into my hat. I was already out of my mind. A map showing how my heart enters my skull appears before my eyes. A cold hand touches my forehead. The traces of the cold hand have been branded on my forehand and have never disappeared.

Again, "history" is intimately tied to the image of "stone."[13] Unlike the precious object that the stone of "Such a Poem" represented, though, the stone of "Poem No. 14" is a burden to be cast off. And yet, the stone can only fly a parabola, forging its way back to where it came from. The bohemian figure strolling on the city wall may free himself from his hat (formal attire), but historical memory cannot easily be discarded. Ghostlike, it continues to haunt the modern individual trying to carve out a destiny of their own (symbolized by the hat facing the infinite sky). The "beggar"-like community (note that the beggar resembles a *changsŭng*, here translated as "village pole" — the entrance marker to traditional Korean villages), which eerily creeps into the individual's sphere at any moment, does not cease to fill the empty space ideally reserved for the individual's own head (the hat) with the unasked-for burden of history. "Unified" history, however, can only serve to dissociate ("heart" entering "skull") the individual who is branded by it, beyond any choice of their own. The politics of remembrance in Yisang's poetry is, among other things, the commission to memory of the ardent need for a certain freedom to forget.

Closing remarks

Why has the political dimension of Yisang's writings so consistently been forgotten, overlooked, buried beneath mounds of ever-more sophisticated studies of his art; why have readings of Yisang privileged semiotics over semantics, creative drive over expressive drive, to such a degree that what he had to say all but disappeared behind how he said it?[14] There are two obvious answers, both of which seem to me

13 It should be noted that the East Asian literary tradition is extremely rich in stone lore, ascribing to stones/rocks a communicative potency as well as an intimate relationship to both history and the numinous. See Eggert (1997) for an overview of the role of stones in Chinese mirabilia and travel literature. A study of stone lore in the same genres in the Korean literary tradition would yield similar findings.

14 Given my lack of expertise in the vast field of Yisang studies, I may well have overlooked important contributions. However recent English-language publications by more specialized scholars than myself, such as Sone (2016), indicate that my overall assessment may not be too far from the truth after all.

to apply. First, the politically and historically aware and expressive Yisang keeps being erased from memory since the image of the avant-garde, bohemian, modernist poet is needed so much in the writing of Korean literary history: so as to have a worthy ancestry ready for more contemporary "disengaged" literature (*sunsu munhak*), and in order to staff the respective pigeonhole in the literary history of colonial Korea.

Second, it may be less disquieting to marvel at Yisang's verbal and visual artistry than to listen to the agonies and paradoxes expressed by his poetical voice. The tribulations that his poetry exposes are especially those of colonial subjectivity, but not only so; they still haunt postcolonial society. What should national history mean to the modern individual? Is culture, is community, destiny? Are nationalism and the identification of erstwhile collaborators the best answers to the predicaments of colonial heritage in a globalized world?

Questions like these come to the fore when reading Yisang's poetry in ways that take his intellectual torments seriously. More than anything, his distrust of a celebratory politics of remembrance is what makes a celebratory remembrance of Yisang's politics so difficult. And yet, since what he has to say is still so relevant to contemporary society, his poetry cannot be simply forgotten. Like the "specter" in "Poem No. 14," the political expressiveness of Yisang's poetry will reappear only to be forgotten again, until one day the "stone" haunting his poems finally dissolves under close scrutiny.

References

Eggert, Marion (2005): "Yisang. Eine Vorrede", in: Eggert, Marion; Yang, Hanju; Göritz, Mathias (trls.): *Yisang: Mogelperspektive*. Graz: Literaturverlag Droschl, 5–7

Eggert, Marion (1997): "Der wolkige Fels. Vom Leben der Steine in chinesischer Anekdoten- und Reiseliteratur", in: Stanca Scholz (ed.): *Wasser-Spuren. Festschrift für Wolfram Naumann zum 65. Geburtstag*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 281–296

Em, Henry (1995): "Nationalist discourse in modern Korea: Minjok as democratic imaginery". PhD diss., University of Chicago

Frankl, John M. (2006): "Recent Works in English on Yi Sang", in: *Yisang ribyu*, 5: 177–179

Gardner, William (2005): "The Country Without a Shape: Spatial and Temporal Limits in the Poetry of Yi sang and Ogata Kamenosuke", in: *Yisang ribyu*, 4, 1–29

Hanscom, Christ (2013): The Real Modern. Literary Modernism and the Crisis of Representation in Colonial Korea. Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center

Kim Ch'ohŭi (2006): "Yisang si-e nat'anan kogohakchŏk sayu yŏn'gu", in: *Yisang ribyu*, 5, 99–131

Kim Chuhyŏn (ed.) (2009): *Chŏngbon Yisang munhak chŏnjip 1: Si*. Seoul: Somyŏng ch'ulp'an

Kim, John H. (2018): "As the Crow Flies: Yi Sang's Aerial Poetics", in: *Journal of Korean Studies* 23/2: 241–274

Kim Myŏnsu (2003): "Yisang munhak yŏn'gu-ŭi chŏngch'isŏng", in: *Yisang ribyu*, 2: 207–211

Kim Tae-ung (2017): „Yisang ch'ogi ilmunsi-ŭi chŏngch'ijŏk sangsangnyŏk", in: *Yisang ribyu*, 13: 5–31

Kwŏn Yŏngmin (ed.) (2009): *Yisang chŏnjip. Vol. 1: Si*. Seoul: Ppul

Pak Sangsun (trl., ann.) (2019): *Yisang. Nanŭn changnangam sinbu-wa kyŏrhonhanda. Haesŏkp'an Yisang si chŏnjip.* Seoul: Minŭmsa

Shin Hyŏngch'ŏl (2002): "Yisang si-e nat'anan 'sisŏn'-ŭi chŏngch'ihak-kwa 'kŏul'-ŭi chuch'eron yŏn'gu", in: *Han'guk hyŏndae munhak yŏn'gu*, 12, 317–370

Smith, Kevin (2016): "Pummeling Doves. Japanese Militarization and Yi Sang's Bilingual Poetry", in: *Yisang ribyu*, 11: 130–150

Sone, Seunghee (2016): "The Mirror Motif in The Crow's Eye View (*Ogamdo*) Poems", in: *Seoul Journal of Korean Studies*, 29/1: 193–217

Yi Chŏngsŏk (2009): "Yisang munhak-ŭi chŏngch'isŏng", in: *Hyŏndae sosŏl yŏn'gu*, 42: 369–395