



The History of Division in the Conception of National Literature

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1.

The purpose of this article is to analyze the how the conception of the term *Minjok Moonhak* (national literature) has been perceived differently in South and North Korea. In other words, this article will examine how the modern concept of ‘*Moonhak*,’ Korean equivalent for ‘literature,’ which was shared by both Koreas during the colonial period, is now perceived differently due to ideological differences under the ‘socialist vs. liberal democracy’ system on the Korean Peninsula after division. The discussion of the division of the conception of national literature is conversely based on the premise that both Koreas have historically shared the same concept. Notwithstanding the system of division, which has lasted for more than 70 years, the speech community composed of spoken (Korean/*Joseon-eo*) or written (Hangul/*Joseon-mun*) language¹ is still viable; each language does not require interpretation and translation. This is fortunate, given that there is a high possibility that the Korean Peninsula will be reunited someday.

When discussing the national literature of South and North Korea, academic discussion will be impossible if one side is consistently regarded as orthodox and disparages the other. If each country does not recognize the value of the writers and works of its counterpart because the two Koreas are caught up in the realms of ideology, Korean cultural heritage that encompasses both North and South Korea will be greatly reduced. From the perspective of Conceptual History [*Begriffsgeschichte*], which historically analyzes certain concepts and terms, ‘Korean literature and *Joseon* literature’ are not synonyms for ‘national literature,’ but are rather antonyms. This occurs because when referring to ‘national literature’ as ‘Korean literature’ and ‘*Joseon* literature,’ there is an underlying assumption that one side considers their own literature representative of that of the whole Peninsula, taking the other

¹ In this article, ‘Joseon-eo’ and ‘Joseon-mun,’ respectively, refer to North Korean spoken and written language while Korean/Hangul refers to South Korean spoken and written language.

out of the picture.

Those who discuss ‘Korean literature’ from a ‘Seoul-centric’ viewpoint would exclude ‘Anti-Japanese Revolutionary Literature’ such as *Pibada* (“*Sea of Blood*”) and *Sahyangga* (“Song for Homesickness”) which are known to have been written by North Korean leader Kim Il Sung, ‘*Suryong* (Supreme Leader) Image Literature’ such as *Immortal History*, and *Immortal Leadership* of the April 15 Literary Production Unit, and the majority of ‘*Juche* (self-reliance) Literature’ or ‘Military-first Literature,’ which have almost become synonymous with North Korean literature, from national literature. Similarly, those who view ‘*Joseon* literature’ from a ‘Pyongyang-centric’ viewpoint would eliminate ‘nationalist literature’ represented by authors such as Lee Kwang-soo, Choi Nam-seon, Kim Dong-in, and Yeom Sang-seop, ‘proletarian literature’ represented by Im Hwa, Kim Nam-cheon, and Lee Won-jo, ‘pure literature’ represented by Lee Tae-jun, Jung Ji-yong, Baek Seok, and Lee Sang, and ‘postmodern literature’ represented by Jang Jeong-il, Kim Young-ha, Park Min-gyu, and Ha Sang-wook from their spectrum of national literature. This therefore leads to an ‘eliminary history of literature.’ For this reason, it can be said that the terms ‘Korean Literature’ and ‘*Joseon* Literature’ are products of self-centric ideas created by the division system.

2.

After the Korean War, concepts of national literature in South and North Korea observed the internalized division and intensified confrontation between the two Koreas, resulting in the fortification of the left-right struggle and the division system. Using the legitimacy of national history as a socio-cultural tool to strengthen their system of dictatorship, both South and North Korea distorted national literature into nationalist literature and claimed exclusive ownership. South Korea's national literature and North Korea's *Juche* literature were used as propagandistic tools for competition despite sharing a common mother-tongue and ethnicity. In South Korea, the concept of national literature was used as counter-discourse by the civil society against the state-controlled 'national culture' that was promoted by the military dictatorship then. For instance, the concept of value-oriented national literature was proposed under the pretext for the purpose of finding oneself amid the consciousness of a national historical crisis and improving the lives of the people. In North Korea, there was an emphasis on the factor of ethnocentrism in *Juche* literature. This factor dominated over the orientation towards universal international solidarity in socialist literature.

In South Korea, the concept of national literature lost its influence since the 1990s because nationalism, which was the basis of resistance national literature, had been reduced to the outdated ideology of exclusive nationalism that goes against the global trend of multiculturalism. For example, the Council of Writers for Freedom and Practice [자유실천문인협의회], which started as a literary organization resisting the against the oppression of the *Yushin* (Revitalizing Reforms) dictatorship system in 1974, was expanded and reorganized into a progressive writers organization called the Association of Writers for National Literature [민족문학작가회의] in 1987. This was later renamed as the Writers Association of Korea [한국작가회의] in 2007; this process is symbolic of the decline of the concept of national literature.

Currently in 2021, the prominence of concept of national literature has diminished on the Korean Peninsula. However, the concept cannot be discarded for the upkeep of the cause of the nation and reunification. On the one hand, the concept is rejected and regarded as an outdated notion that does not fit into the spectrum of multiculturalism in the globalized information society. However, on the other hand, the two Koreas, as the only divided country in the world, still want to claim the legitimacy of their national history.

3.

What about the case of North Korea? As the theoretical system of *Juche* literature accepts ‘*Suryong* Theory,’ the worship of a deified individual, and ‘Anti-Japanese Revolutionary Literature and Art,’ which sanctified partisan propaganda, as the only legitimate tradition of art, national literature does not assume a significant presence. The identity of national literature and national characteristics are only mentioned as one of the elements of *Juche* literature. However, the problem here is that the discussion of national literature in Pyongyang does not comprehensively encompass the entirety of the Korean ethnic group including South Korea, but is only limited within the microcosmos of *Juche* Literature, which exclusively refers to the “people of Kim Il Sung” and *Suryong* theory that centers on worshipping the individual. In other words, the unilateral and exclusive claim on national literature has been made under the self-centric slogan of ‘the *Joseon* first principle.’

In conclusion, the concept of ‘literature/national literature,’ based on the solid common ground of the speech community, has been running on the strong centrifugal force of ideological confrontation over the past 70 years. From the perspective of conceptual history, the history of literature of Korea after liberation is a record of exclusion and competition for legitimacy between ‘Korean and *Joseon* literature.’ South Korea’s ‘Korean literature’ and North Korea’s ‘*Joseon* literature’ have claimed exclusive ownership over national literature in their own ways. Therefore, the division of the conception of national literature is still a phenomenon in progress.

However, we cannot view the reality of the division of the concept of the nation and national literature from a pessimistic standpoint. The power of language and literature as important forces of soft power that may visualize the peace regime should, on the other hand, not be neglected. National literature will play a role as a means of ‘communication’ and a cultural and political symbol of uniting the mind. The history of division in the concept of national literature is still in progress, but the power of language will work to somehow dismantle such division and break down the walls if an opportunity opens. In order to bridge the gap between the two Koreas, more efforts have been made in the field of language and literature compared to those in other genres of art. These efforts have been demonstrated by the Joint Board of South and North Korea for the Compilation of *Gyeoremal-Keunsajeon* (*Gyeoremal-Keunsajeon* Committee, 거래말큰사전 편찬위원회, 2004 - present), the organization of the 6.15 Association of Writers for National Literature [6.15민족문학인협회] (2006), and the publication of *Unification Literature* (2007).

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