Proletarian-Amateur Theater: Political Performativity and its Memory

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This study focuses on the proletarian-amateur theater of Korea during the Japanese colonial period as a popular mechanism through which to promote socialism as a cultural experience, while simultaneously employing it as a form of art partaking in the formation of socialist culture. Proletarian-amateur theater that could communicate with the masses was in large part the result of the successful socialist appropriation of the people's taste for sinp'a[new wave drama]. To this end, proletarian-amateur theater also exhibited similar characteristics when it came to the performance methods employed. Proletarian-amateur theater was generally staged in combination with other types of cultural forms, and this hybrid construction is characterised as “subversive bundle sale”. However, the tightening of performance regulations from the late 1920s onwards caused proletarian-amateur theater to exist solely within the “subversive” invisible sphere, termed here as the absent presence. While the emergence of proletarian-amateur theater was indigenous in nature, its collapse was occasioned by the coercive exercise of colonial power. This result came as part of the successful application of the politics of space to proletarian theater, a move dividing the center from the periphery, controlling performances through the deliberate separation of political and artistic practices. The experience of proletarian-amateur theater was stored as inactive energy in individuals’ biological memories. Over time, this became a cultural memory which could be activated at any moment once circumstances became conducive to such an emergence. The passionate reactions exhibited after the liberation of the nation in 1945 stand as a salient example of this reality.

Keywords: amateur theater, proletarian theater, colonial period, propaganda, KAPF

Amateur Theater and Socialism

Soin’gük has been the Korean counterpart for the English term “amateur theater” since the modern era. Contrary to what the term signifies, the amateur performances advanced in the early twentieth century Korea deserves more than to be simply neglected as “a theater performed by non-professionals.” The turn of Korean society to the modern era required a notion of theater which differed from the existing types of dramatic art. Moreover, this new style of theater had to satisfy such ambivalent values as commercial and utilitarian functions. This new social situation started to take shape in Korea only from early twentieth century and Koreans did not know about modern theater, and thus it would not have been possible for them to develop a clear cut between professional and amateur theaters. The borders between them were seriously blurring, and their actual differences were minor during the early
stages. Leaving aside the issue of such a distinction, a new form of theatrical art, later known as sin’pa [new wave drama], did cause a tremendous stir when it first emerged. However it did not take long for sin’pa to begin to stagnate, which was from the mid-1910s onwards, and moreover such core figures as Kim Tosan and Im Sŏnggu died in 1921. Under this situation, in Korea there seemed not enough theatrical activities, and thus no “theatrical world” as such, for which a system of categorization needed to be prepared. The sense of expertise had yet to take root, and an agreed form of theater needed to be settled. It was under this particular situation that provided amateur theater with a special position.

Although it is true to say that the social organizations such as schools and religious groups, which emerged as a result of the advent of modern institutions, served as the basis for the rise of the amateur theater, it was the March First Movement that gave amateur theater a strong impetus to be developed into a considerable historical phenomenon. The March First Movement consequently made the Government-General of Chosŏn not only change its policies, but also, to some extent, tolerate the activities of Chosŏn people’s own. Having developed alongside social organizations, especially youth associations [ch’ŏngnyŏnhoe], which were rapidly mushrooming the amateur theater soon achieved its status as a cultural icon in the 1920s. The prosperity of amateur theater of this time can be easily evidenced through the newspapers of the day. A great majority of these articles are of course very short, and more often than not provide partial information. For instance, while facts such as the name of the organizers, performance time and location, and performance objectives are always stated, the actual repertory is only sometimes introduced. Meanwhile, the articles which reviewed such performances generally included such facts as the number of people in attendance, the audience’s reaction, and the scale of the funds collected through a performance. As to the reaction of the audience, articles hitherto, without exception, described that: “the performance greatly inspired and moved the audience.” During the absolute scarcity of public performances for the people to enjoy, to view a piece of amateur theater would have been for them somewhat equivalent to watching a Shaman performance [gur]. However, the essence of this phenomenon lay not in the fact that it represented a simple consumption pattern, but rather that the public emerged as the main cultural bodies involved in the production and consumption of theater, and more importantly that people expressed their passion for the new world through theatrical activities. The majority of the newspaper articles written on this topic treated with amateur theater in terms of social values rather than artistic or aesthetic significances. Therefore, amateur theater can be understood as a form of culture fulfilling utilitarian goals.

This essay intends to focus on the steps of the amateur theater later than what is mentioned above, namely the encounter between amateur theater and socialism. Socialism began to rise in Korea and gradually acquired the position of a leading ideology for the new age. The foundations of the Korean Labor and Farmer League

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and Korean Youth League in 1924, as well as the establishment of the Korean Communist Party in 1925, were the clear prompts for the immediate changes to be given to Korean society, and amateur theater, a new cultural experience for the public, was not an exception. The diffusing of socialist ideology into amateur theater was an unavoidable phenomenon, and on the other hand the very existence of amateur theater as a form of media, during the meantime, had to be appropriated by socialists in order to further the promotion of their ideology.

Existing studies tend to display agreed positions for the matters of the advance of amateur theater, socialist influences, and its extinction in a consistent fashion. My position fundamentally concurs with this prevailing opinions. My concern particularly here is how our narratives on the historical significance of the amateur theater, or proletarian-amateur theater precisely, may appear different depending on which standpoint is taken.

Kang Yônghŭi and Yi Yôngmi, the pioneers in the study of proletarian theater, envisaging a possible conjecture that proletarian-amateur theater possessed populist contents and a simplicity of form that would sent it astray from sin’pa theater or artistic new dramas, ascribed its historical significance to two points. First, proletarian-amateur theater directly and indirectly provided opportunity for semi-proletarian theater companies to rise. Second, proletarian-amateur theater served as a basin of human resources network and training of staff for the local proletarian theater companies that preferred small-scale mobile stages during the early 1930s. Furthermore, the two researchers explained that it was under these circumstances that the KAPF had attempted to organize a union incorporating these local proletarian-amateur theater companies according to the change of its own overall direction. To summarize, proletarian-amateur theater has gone through the following steps: “influence of proletarian-amateur theater—driving force behind the emergence of local indigenous proletarian theater companies—KAPF’s organization of local proletarian theater companies.” This particular vantage point has been constantly reiterated in most later studies on the proletarian theater of Korea.

It is clear that these three elements, i.e. proletarian-amateur theater, local professional theater companies, and the KAPF, can be bound up together to constitute a distinct category in a discussion on the emergence of proletarian theater. Nevertheless, whether or not they actually interacted in order to bring out a development of proletarian-amateur theater remains as question. The examples

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3 The term proletarian-amateur theater applies to the “amateur-theater generated under the banner of socialism”. Of course, amateur-theater performances put together by an organizing group with clear socialist tendencies and repertoire can be construed as the purest kind. This perspective will be discussed in the later part of this essay. However, proletarian-amateur theater could not have survived if it solely had socialist propaganda. Therefore, this term is meant to be used flexibly when referring to the amateur theater that combined with the socialist ideology.


5 For example, An Kwanghŭi, who conducted an in-depth study of proletarian theater in his PhD dissertation, can be regarded as having inherited the tenets of the evaluation of proletarian theater put forward by Kang Yônghŭi and Yi Yôngmi. See An Kwanghŭi 1989.
provided in existing studies as evidence for the existence of the semi-proletarian amateur theater companies in this period do not seem convincing. In fact there are no materials through which to prove the existence of the practical relationship between proletarian-amateur theater and proletarian theater companies. There are three main factors that made existing studies reach such a conclusion. The first is the overall preference among researchers to relate proletarian theater to the KAPF. The second is deficiency in historical materials to base on for those who try to find the historical significance of the proletarian-amateur theater in Korea. And the third, proletarian-amateur theater did not last long in Korea as it seems to have completely disappeared by the mid-1930s.

The central problem will be in this regard whether it is really relevant to discuss proletarian-amateur theater based on its relationship with the KAPF or the history of theater. Of course, the role of the KAPF as the symbolic axis in the socialist literary movement of Korea deserves attention, nevertheless it should not be exaggerated either. The KAPF happened to take the role of the “symbolic axis” not because it provided the essence of the socialist literary movement, but rather because there were situational reasons that required the KAPF to lead the socialist literary movement. Moreover, the proletarian theater of Korea was not a literary fashion of a small group of adherents. It has been resulted from the encounter between a socialist ideology, which gave a considerable impact on the Korean society since the mid-1920s, and the field of theater. Therefore, our study of proletarian theater needs to be reconstructed, rejecting the previous framework that focused on the theatrical activities led by the KAPF and sidelined all others. It is precisely at this juncture that proletarian-amateur theater should be situated. Proletarian-amateur theater was a public cultural experience carving out socialism in the minds of the audience and a form of culture which took part in the composition of the socialist culture in the early twentieth century Korea.

Cultural changes do not occur taking precisely the same chronological course with the shift of the ideology that affected it, and more importantly the direction of cultural changes is usually not clearly visible. The same naturally holds true about amateur theater. Those who produced or enjoyed amateur theater were not individuals or groups who were somehow special or superior to others. Rather, amateur theater was the possession of the masses, and contained reflections of their way of perceiving and feeling about the world that was dominating. Therefore, it would not have been easy for the new set of culture, socialism, to completely convert them into its preferred style. In this sense, themes such as how socialism was able to infiltrate the existing cultural field and how it altered the existing culture should be analyzed from the standpoint that they continued to be relevant even after proletarian-amateur theater disappeared.

Special attention must also be paid to the performativity of proletarian-amateur theater. The fact that materials pertaining to the Korean proletarian-amateur
theater are greatly limited, a difficult situation for a researcher, should be taken to imply, because of its own characteristics, that we should approach this issue considering its own specific modes to exist and disappear. From the early 1920s onwards, the overarching goal of amateur theater was not the conducting of theater performances itself, but rather it accepted the fate of becoming a tool used for achieving another goal. This trait is even more apparent in the case of proletarian-amateur theater. Therefore, the emphasis should be on what the proletarian-amateur theater did to contribute and survive rather than its repertoire.

If socialism has engrained itself as a meaningful part in the cultural history of the modern Korea, as well as in the psychological history of Koreans, it was due at large to the cultural planning and the related institutional practices of socialists amidst the tensions against colonial system. In other words, such planning and practices allowed socialism a seat in the cultural history of Korea. Precisely here is the proletarian-amateur theater, which has indigenously grown as part of the foundation of the socialist movement.

**Tastes and Project—the socialist appropriation of the *sin'pa***

> Pitiful proletarians, this society does not show you any mercy  
> There is no salvation for you, the people of Chosŏn,  
> Not even in Manchuria you've come to with the belief that it was heaven  
> You are disappearing,  
> Death follows everywhere you go,  
> The people of Chosŏn! Where will you go from now? \(^7\)

Various kinds of groups were involved in the organization and performance of amateur theater. These included students’ associations, religious groups, youth conferences, night school associations, clubs, commercial associations, labor unions, agricultural associations, sports associations, and school drama clubs, as well as youth associations. Unlike such cases, staging of amateur theater was often realized by local leaders without any attachment to a specific organization, jointly by separate organizations, and sometimes even by local newspaper branches.

Although amateur theater was ostensibly staged as a form of “recreation” for parents, and local audiences residents, the actual objective was often facilitating the activities of the relevant organizations such as raising funds for constructing buildings, relieving people from famine and other natural disasters. On certain occasions, performances were sponsored by the organizations intending to advertise their objectives to the public, while propaganda for public purposes such as “improvement of life style” or “promotion of culture” was used as an excuse. Performances were staged in local theaters, halls, village squares, or sometimes in private gardens. What is surprising is that the number of audiences for amateur theater performances is in most cases reported as hundreds and sometimes almost a thousand. However,

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\(^7\) “Production of biblical drama shut down for disturbing the peace.” *Sidae ilbo*, 1925.12.30.
judging from the small and modest space for the performance exhibited in Picture 1, the capacity of theaters seems to have been far less. Although doubts about the number of audience remain, it is true at least that it attracted many people, in spite of the lack of theatrical mechanism to adequately deliver the story.

To some extent, inexpensive entrance fee contributed to mobilizing people. The price, varying depending on seats, ranged as little as between 10-30 chon and even free performances were often available. The money needed to stage the performance was prepared from the donation of the local leaders as charity. For those who came to see the performance, amateur theater provided an opportunity to enjoy a new culture at little or no cost. Low cost cannot fully explain the reason for the popularity of the amateur theater. It was rather the nature of amateur theater that was able to create a certain cultural consensus through the communication with “a shared sense of commiseration.” Although the purpose of performance for the amateur theater companies was raising funds for securing their activities, “relief of the self or others” was always claimed as the major significance of performance and the audience expressed its commiseration by attending the performances. Commiseration thus was a form of mutual aid and the courtesy for self-salvation of both sides. Amateur theater performances functioned as a sphere to discuss public issues in the atmosphere of Choson society striving for reformation. The following report on the Kohaktang amateur theater featured in Picture 1 conveys the social atmosphere that prevailed during this time:

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8 The performance in Picture 1 was staged at the Kohaktang located in the Anam-dong area of Seoul. Other available pictures from this period also show that most other stages were just as small in size, Choson ilbo, Jul. 17, 1924.

9 This kind of cultural consensus referred to as “commiseration tongjöng” became common from the 1910s onwards. U Sujin stresses that this “commiseration” contributed to helping the people escape the harsh reality and envision an ideal illusory society or nation, and regards the tears shed during sinp’a dramas as evidence for working of such mechanism. See U Sujin 2006:98-123. However, “commiseration” as a mechanism for audience after the March First Movement of 1919 has to be treated in a different framework.
The most popular plays include Kosŏng[Loud Sounds] in two acts, Hwanggŭnguk [Gold Country] in two acts and Ujong[Friendship] in three acts. The scenarios are interesting and the thespians are quite well trained for amateurs. What made me go and see the performance was not the story or their skills but rather was my sense of commiseration on young people of proletarian class living in huts and on millet but pursuing studies; (however), every time their performance are guaranteed to attract a more number of audience than expected. Furthermore, the candid satire in their scenarios about the injustice existing as the pitfall of the current society are recommendable for everyone to see at least once.  

Nevertheless, even though the culture of amateur theater contained an ethics of sympathy that was rooted in the need for social reforms, it was not successful in creating unique and relevant framework. Since as early as the beginning of the twentieth century, theaters began to be regarded as having a function for the public and indeed the theatrical activities attempted to prove its effective value through additional practices such as holding of charity performances. Amateur theater, although characterized by its use as a tool for other purposes rather than a theater movement, also inherited the same function; however it also inherited the familiar style from the previous theatrical generation. As such, it was only natural that the majority of performances did not feature new repertories, but a variation of existing themes. An analysis of the titles of some 400 works from this period reveals many similarities to those employed in the 1910s. Although the exact nature of each story cannot be ascertained, the general practice of inserting the main story or theme in the title makes it amply clear that the repertories of amateur theater closely resembled those of the 1910s.  

Developed under the chaotic search for modernity of the 1910s marked by shaking of society’s fundamental principles, advents of unclear ideologies and visions for the future, and suppressive political environment, the sinp’a dramas envisioned the unambiguous moral world that existed in the past. A multi-layered strategy to incorporate such factors as gender and social class was employed in sinp’a dramas. Sinp’a drama could be divided into two types; men achieving a social success with social positions formally unknown such as soldier, policeman, banker, teacher or...
student, and women suffering from the hardships owing to women's different social class. In the case of the amateur theater, although variations were made, their repertoires were rehash of the “promotion of virtue and reproval of vice” [kwŏnson ch'ingak] and the “repentance and emergence as a new person” [kaegwa ch'ŏnsŏn]: these two story subjects remained as an effective tool.

However, the amateur theater was not always a mere amateur version of the sinp'a dramas from the 1910s. Although widely influenced by the popular culture of the 1910s, amateur theater was after 1920 combined with a new cultural tendency to create a unique dimension. Among their repertoires were dramas written by professional play-writers such as Yun Paengnam, Yi Kise, and Kim Yongbo, which can be regarded as a clear precursor of this change. Amid circumstances marked by a general shortage of theater companies, these thespians established the Art Association in 1921 and promptly put two plays on stage. Yun Paengnam and Kim Yongbo were rare writers who published play collections. Although some plays could be obtained because the organizer of drama was from the same hometown as the play-writer, the fact that the works written by such celebrities were used by amateur theaters, should manifest that the amateur theater also had some quality. While these dramas exhibited signs of moving beyond the previous era, they nevertheless did not emphasize the modern values that were eventually highlighted in early modern dramas. However, attention needs to be paid here to the fact that performances during this period were characterized by a focus on the notions of personal salvation and enlightenment; as a result, the contents of such performances were prepared in a manner which reflected such needs. In such cases, new themes such as reform of the family and social structure, position of the poor and morals of the rich, and importance of education were introduced. As such, the situation during the early 1920s when the sinp'a trend reached its peak was marked by the existence of a teleological discourse on reform. These characteristics continued to be widespread after this period.

It was during this period that proletarian-amateur theater began to emerge as a form of art, whose activities started to benefit from the effect of the March First Movement of 1919 that intertwined with socialism. The central force that made reflections of socialist ideology on proletarian-amateur theater is clearly exhibited in their usage of such terminologies as proletarian and labor while explaining the objectives and significances of their performances. These terms were selected in order to gain the sense of commiseration that had previously been reserved for sinp'a dramas but consequently socialist. The terminology eventually has been widely used even by those who described non-socialist stories. Of course, the commiseration envisaged in their minds was supposed to come from the lower class with poverty,

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12 For more on the study of sinp’a drama during the 1910s, please refer to Lee Seung-hee 2002 and 2003.

13 Unmyŏng[Destiny], Huimujŏng(adapted from Les Misérables), Kukkyŏng[Border], Yonggŏp ŭi ch’ŏ [Wife of Eternity] written by Yun Paengnam; Huimang ŭi nummul[Tears of Hope] and Nun onin pam [Snowy Night] written by Yi Kise; Ch’ŏngch’i sammu[Devotion in Politics] and Sin ŭi kajŏng[A Poet’s Family] written by Kim Yongbo.
and the object of charity was to support self-study or night school.

The full development of socialism in the proletarian-amateur theater of Korea began with the emergence of organizations which exhibited socialist characteristics. For example, the Ōnyang Youth Association, which was established in Kyŏngnam Province under the influence of the March First Movement, began from 1921 onwards to organize nationwide lecture tours and a sinp’a theater company. However, in April 1924, the Ōnyang Youth Association organized proletarian-amateur theater performances that featured the repertories A New Dawn for the Farmer and Justice for a Beggar, works which were designed to bring light to the environment of the proletariat and promote the laborers and farmers movement. The staging of such plays, which were sponsored by the Ōnyang Proletarian Association as well as by the Ōnyang branch office of the Chosŏn ilbo, proves that the change in the nature of local movements occasioned by the emergence and spread of the socialist ideology, which had been the decisive element behind the emergence of proletarian-amateur theater. Thus, by this point, proletarian-amateur theater was already no longer dependent on public tastes, but organized under socialist project.

Here an important question can be raised. How was it possible for the public, and even the main advocates, who had a well-established taste for sinp’a to come into contact with socialism? Tensions inevitably emerged between the taste for sinp’a and socialist planning during the 1920s, a period in which the Korean public discovered the nation and simultaneously underwent the historical experience of identifying the specific differences therein on the path to the socialist perspectives. Fundamentally, the perception based on the sinp’a taste and socialism interacted within a hostile relationship which could not be reconciled. Socialism emerged as a new force which, while having no choice but to accept bourgeois-style enlightenment that promised a romantic future that was devoid of any perception of a social class-based world and instilled with a sense of helplessness toward the world, strongly stressed the fact that the perceived dejection and inability to surmount the difficulties associated with this dilemma represented a fundamental untruth.

Proletarian-amateur theater played a role of mitigating the conflicts between the existing public taste and socialist planning through the socialist appropriation of an elements of sinp’a, namely that of ethical bipolarity. The issue of good and evil was reinterpreted from the standpoint of social classes. The comparison of the immorality of the bourgeois class and the ironic status of the proletarian class was in this regard meant to evoke the historical inevitability of socialism. Therefore, the belief in notions such as “pleasure follows pain”, the mystical concept of “I can do it!”, and the sense of coming to terms with self-torment were regarded as subjects that should either be reorganized or be disposed of altogether.

As aptly conveyed in the Chaeya ū chongsori [Sound of a Bell at New Year’s Eve], the story structure in plays of this kind were based on an ethical bipolarity or

15 -“Proletarian-amateur theater proves popular,” Chosŏn ilbo, Apr. 7, 1924.
One author addressed the issue of the overarching emotion of indignation that prevailed at the time and theater censorship as follows: “If the tears from Ssangongnu were shed by individuals within the private sphere, then the tears emanating as a result of Arirang kogae [Arirang Hill] spread to the social sphere as the boundary between the public and private spheres began to disappear. Meanwhile, Pak Ch’omji demanded that only one tragic teardrop be shed,” Lee Seung-hee 2007:466.

Another open contest for the development of a propaganda play organized by the Yŏngdong Laborers and Farmers Association was referred to in An Kwanghui’s study, An Kwanghui 2001:47. In early 1924, the Yŏngdong Laborers and Farmers Association released the following advertisement, “We have long been striving to enlighten the proletarian class, especially the agrarian class, and to remove the despotism of the monied class. To make it known widely, we have decided to conduct an open contest seeking plays which may promote the labor movement. While 50 won was to be granted for first prize, second prize was 25 won, and third 5 won. Born on August 31 of 1923, the Yŏngdong Laborers and Farmers Association was an outgrowth of the Yŏngdong Peasant Association which had been reorganized as a labor group that included not only peasants but also proletarians. It enthusiastically carried out activities such as the opening of a labor night school on September 16, 1923. Another example of such activities was the above-mentioned open contest. While the actual candidates who took part in this open contest are unknown, attention must be drawn here to the fact that this open contest was planned with clear intention and needs. Regardless of its outcome, the open contest was an effective promotional activity.

As can easily be construed, the repertories of proletarian-amateur theater appear to have been resulted either from a combination of the knowledge gleaned from educational spaces such as night schools, reading clubs, or lectures, or from educational spaces such as night schools, reading clubs, or lectures, or from

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17 “Open contest for the development of a propaganda play organized by the Yŏngdong Laborers and Farmers Association,” Tonga ilbo, Jan. 18, 1924. This open contest to foster the development of a propaganda play organized by the Yŏngdong Laborers and Farmers Association was referred to in An Kwanghui’s study, An Kwanghui 2001:47.

the acquisition of socialist tenets passed off as modern knowledge, and the reality of the proletarian class. Despite that the majority of proletarian-amateur theater works were anonymously written, and also that there are practically no such plays extant today, it can be evidenced by an analysis of the relevant data that exists. Very few of the repertories were written by known theatrical or literary writers, and there were only one play that was a translation from a foreign language. In addition, it is also likely that organizations and associations featured the same repertories presented under different titles. For instance, records indicate that four different performances entitled *Nodong sinsŏng* [Sacredness of Labor] were staged. Although there is no way of ascertaining whether these were renditions of the same work, we can see here that the knowledge obtained from learning spaces became the main themes in proletarian-amateur theater. “Labor is sacred!” was their catchphrase at the time, and the logic, “people who eat and sleep but do not labor are thieves. The power of production stems from labor. Labor is the most sacred,” was taught in textbooks. It can thus be surmised that those who are involved in the production of proletarian-amateur theater reflected on performances their own lives as laborers from the standpoint of “Sacredness of labor.”

Thus, proletarian-amateur theater’s ability to communicate with the public during the 1920s was based on the widespread acceptance of the successful socialist appropriation of the *sinp’a* taste. Of course, it was not an intended denouement. In other words, they simply had an unrejectable taste for *sinp’a*. Henceforth, the *sinp’a* style functioned both as a tool showing the existence of a social class-based society and as an ethical parameters that aroused a certain sentiment. In other words, socialist project and the taste for *sinp’a* were effectively combined. Nevertheless, the planners of proletarian-amateur theater did not regard this combination as their ultimate goal. This was because the tenets of socialism obtained from learning spaces such

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19 Sponsored by the Kwangju Commerce and Industry Club of Chŏnnam Province, Kim Hyŏngyong [Kim Song]’s *Chiok* [Hell] was performed at the Kwangjujwa Theater on Apr. 24-25, 1930, only to be subsequently cancelled. At this time, Kim Hyŏngyong was living in Kwangju. However, given the fact that Chiok was his first work, the argument cannot be made that this work was in reality written by a professional writer. “The performance of *Chiok* is shut down by the police,” *Chosŏn ilbo*, May 1, 1930.

20 In 1929, the P’yŏngwŏn Students Association in P’yŏngnam Province organized a tennis contest, amateur theater, and lectures during the school vacation period. During this period, Upton Sinclair’s *Ich’ong ui sanui* [The Man Living in the Second Floor] was performed (“Successful end to the P’yŏngwŏn Tennis Contest, Music Concert and Proletarian-Amateur Theater Performance,” *Chosŏn ilbo*, Aug. 22, 1929). The first official performance of *Ich’ong ui sanui*, which was one of the main repertories of proletarian-amateur theater, was, if we exclude the performance carried out in 1927 by the theater department of the Tokyo Office of the KAPF, carried out in 1930 by the drama department of Minadojwa Theater. Based on this timeline, it would appear that the performance staged by the *Pyŏngwŏn Students Association actually occurred a bit earlier.

21 It was performed by the Inch’ŏn Labor Association in 1924, Hamhŏng Labor Association of Hamnam Province in 1925, Onori Youth in Sanggich’ŏn-myŏn, Hamhŏng of Hamnam Province in 1926, and the Ulsan Tongmin Theater Company in 1927.

22 Quoted in Cho Chŏngbong 2000:122. Cho Chŏngbong broke down the textbooks used by night schools into three categories, namely nationalist, imperialist, and self-protectionist texts. To this end, Cho classified Yi Sŏng-hwan and the Yongjŏng songsil sŏjmŏn’s work entitled *Nongmin tokbon* [Compulsory Text for Farmers] as an example of a nationalist text. Cho Chŏngbong 2000:97. The quotation above is taken from Chapter 16 of the *Nongmin tokbon* and *Nodong sinsŏng* published by the Yongjŏng songsil sŏjmŏn (year of publication unknown).
as night schools, reading clubs, and lectures and the taste and the project were excellently combined to constitute a whole.

**Political Performativity?—“The use of subversive bundle sale methods” and the absent presence**

The hopes of the various segments of society were communicated within this widespread cultural consensus of “commiseration”. Amateur theater fell somewhere between singing and dancing and public address. If its goal had been obtaining funds in exchange of simple entertainment, amateur theater could have been classified alongside singing and dancing. However, a drama could somewhat casually convey serious discourses, which were normally delivered through lectures but impossible through singing and dancing alone.

Proletarian-amateur theater also has grown out of these general demands including that it preferred the same period for its season as that of amateur theater. Although periods such as the off-season for farming were generally regarded as the best time to mobilize large audiences, traditional holidays such as the New Year, Taeborum (fifteenth day of the first month on the lunar calendar), Tano (the fifth day of the fifth month of the lunar calendar), and Ch’usok (Full-moon festival) were also in their schedule. There were performances when natural disasters were common, in order to raise funds. Of course, performances were held to advertise the establishment of an organization. As it was one of the natures of the proletarian amateur-theater to work for the masses, it would make immediate actions in response to public needs. For example, when rice mills in the Chinnamp’o area stopped operating and many workers were laid off because of the lack of raw materials in July 1925, the Chinnamp’o Proletarian-Amateur Theater Club promptly staged a play entitled *Hwanggum sesang* [The Materialistic World] in order to console the unemployed workers. Their efforts proved to be successful that there were an audience of some 1,000 people.

However, the reduction of the objectives of proletarian-amateur theater to those of acquiring funds, promotion, and enlightenment in effect only paints half of the picture. In this regard, it is highly likely that the context and strategies behind the implementation of proletarian-amateur theater, as well as the relevant historical trends associated with this phenomenon, are in fact more distinct and complex than would appear on the surface.

As mentioned above, performances during the 1920s were for the most part geared towards the acquiring of funds. Performances staged in order to ensure the survival of individual educational institutes or organizations were numerous, among

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24 “1,000 workers engaged in the Chinnamp’o rice mill industry lose their jobs,” *Chos’on ilbo*, Jul. 10, 1925; “The situation of some 1,000 unemployed laborers in Chinnamp’o made even worse by food shortages,” *Chos’on ilbo*, Jul. 15, 1925.

25 “Theater to console the unemployed,” *Sidae ilbo*, Jul. 29, 1925.
which night schools were the most frequent beneficiary. As these goals could hardly
be achieved through one performance, tours were organized in the local areas and
sometimes even further afield. In other instances, large-scale events were also
organized. Contrary to what can be expected, many proletarian-amateur theater
performances displayed characteristics equivocal to be understood clearly as of the
left-wing. This ambiguity, coming from its own characteristics, putting various
elements under the same bill, can be explained in terms: One is that there included
at least one of entertainments such as dance, music, speech, or even a film, before
and after a performance. The other is that stories of different nature such as love
stories, tragic and comic performances were staged alongside proletarian-amateur
stories. For example, the Labor Performance Festival hosted by the Inch’ŏn Labsors
and Farmers Association was held from May 17-19 of 1924, sponsored by the
branch offices of the Tonga ilbo, Maeil sinmun, Chosŏn ilbo and Sidae ilbo, as well as
the Hanyong and Chemulp’o Youth Associations. This festival designed to raise the
funds needed for building the association’s center and the venue was the Kabuki
Theater. During this event, theater performances such as Nodong sinsŏng Hyŏhan
ŭi kwang[The Glory of Hard Work], Nu ŭi kwang[Glorious Tears], Chisŏng ŭi sori
[The Sound of Knowledge], Chumŏnginya?[Is Your Fist Clenched?] and Wŏlgupil
[Salary Day] were staged, and various musical and dance performances were also
on the program.26 The situation was very much similar in the case of the Amateur
Theater Festival organized by the Inch’ŏn Newspaper Peddlers Association at the
Kabuki Theater on December 3-4, 1927. This particular event, sponsored by the
Inch’ŏn Youth Association, Inch’ŏn Labor Union, and the branch offices of the four
major newspapers, was designed to foster the popularity of the arts and to secure
the funds needed to ensure the survival of the association. The program included,
together with theatrical performances such as Sink’almaen[The New Carmen](love
story), Sŏnsulchip[The Tavern](social drama), and Anya[The Dark Night](tragedy),
more than ten genres; mask dramas, music, dance, the screening of films and so on.

Of course, the use of this kind of mixed structure had been commonplace for
a long time, and thus familiar. The actual size of a program was generally determined
based on the level of urbanization of the area where the event was to be staged. The
bigger the scale of the program required the more human and material resources to
be employed, there needed enough number of residents who are willing to pay at
least a little amount to see the performance. The use of such a structure was thus
commonplace during the 1920s where amateur theater is concerned. For instance,
one finds cases in which plays such as Ch’ohon ŭi p’ye[Problems Associated with Early
Marriage] and Kyegŏp ṭap’a[Destruction of the Social Class Structure]27, or Chaeya
ŭi chongsori[Sound of a Bell at New Year’s Eve] and Siin ŭi kajŏng[A Poet’s Family]
(written by Kim Yŏngbo)28 were performed together with song and dance numbers.

26 “Three-day Labor Performance Festival held to secure funds for the building of a center,”
Tonga ilbo, May 7, 1924; “Labor Performance Festival held today, grand promotional efforts made by the
organizing committee,” Sidae ilbo, May 17, 1925.
27 Nonsan Youth Association, Oct. 1925 (“The Nonsan Youth Association put on a Theater
Performance,” Tonga ilbo, Oct. 21, 1925).
Mixture of programs was in part a result of the desire to “provide the masses who were excluded from culture with interesting and meaningful entertainments.”

Above all it was a good strategy to collect a sufficient amount of money both as funds and production costs-audiences at this time, familiar to the structure of the event. However, in another sense, the funds were mainly for the activities of the organization who invited the performance and this way of fund-raising was somehow not suitable for socialists. It thus can be thought to have been a disguisement, i.e. subversive bundle sale.

On August 1-2, 1923, the Masan Laborers and Farmers Association organized a festival held at the Sujwa Theater featured musical performances during as the first session, and the staging of the performance Hũisaeng(Sacrifice)(social drama) next. Shortly before the second session began, the president of the organizing committee appeared on the stage to introduce the association’s activities since its establishment. Once this was done, he proceeded to talk of a new rational and ideal society for the labor class “that had been formed in somewhere.” It is evident to all that the “somewhere” to which he referred to was Russia, and that “somewhere” was used because of the censorship concerns. The overall narrative of the common style of event was completed with, following this subversive speech, the staging of Hũisaeng [Sacrifice], a play that highlighted the social class issue.

One may find programs which combined amateur theater performances and public addresses. Also in such instances, the true nature of the event was often ambiguous. Leaving aside singing and dancing, some of its amateur dramas were not necessarily related to ideology or sometimes socialists amateur drama followed a lecture of an ordinary issue. The event staged by the Pyǒngwǒn Students Association in Pyǒngnam Province combined four activities: tennis competition, amateur drama, musical concert, and public lecture. While Yǒnaebyeǒng hwanja

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28 Sǒnchǒn Literary Association, Pyǒngbuk, Jan. 1926 (“Sǒnchǒn amateur theater festival proves to be very popular,” Chosǒn ilbo, Jan. 11, 1926; “The amateur theater performance put together by the Sǒnchǒn Literary Association wows audiences,” Tonga ilbo, Jan. 12, 1926).


30 “The Laborers and Farmers Entertainment Festival is an Unmitigated Success,” Chosǒn ilbo, 1923.8.9.

31 From Feb. 13-15, 1926, the Tongmyǒng Youth Association in the Munchǒn-gun area of Hamnam Province held an event that included a series of public addresses and the staging of amateur theater performances. The public addresses were of seven themes: “For laborers”, “Youth, let us go forward”, “The necessity of night schools in rural area”, “Proletarians, let us unite”, “Taking care of rural areas”, “Our important burden”, and “Improvement of local provinces”. Meanwhile, the amateur theater performances were about new and traditional styles of marriage, the reform of evil practices, and the promotion of school spirit. Here, amateur theater can be regarded as having played a secondary role to the public addresses. “Public addresses and amateur theater prove to be popular everywhere,” Tonga ilbo, Feb. 21, 1926.

32 On Aug. 19, 1928, the Chǒkho Boy Scouts Association in Ulsan, Kyǒngnam Province staged an event that featured amateur theater and public lecture. In this particular case, the event was designed to enhance young men in the rural areas' overall level of knowledge and to develop the local province. While the amateur theater performance which was staged, Nodongja ūi chugum[Death of a Laborer], exhibited clear signs of being proletarian-amateur theater, the themes expounded upon during the public addresses, namely “Need to carefully look after the boys who are at a turning point in their lives,” “Facilitating the development of personal independence,” and “The progression of history and our movement” were designed to foster the advancement of the Boy Scout movement. “Amateur theater performance and lecture series organized by the Chǒkho Boy Scouts Association,” Chosǒn ilbo, Aug. 27, 1926.
[Patient of Love Fever] and Ich’ông üi sanai[The Second Story Man] were performed, only two of the four planned speakers actually gave a speech.\(^{33}\) Thus, we can see that amateur theater and public address existed within a complementary relationship whenever these two were combined: only one of them was strategically chosen to deliver the message instead of both of them getting into serious moods. The relatively few cases were successful if not of “subversive bundle sale method” like this. There were not many cases which combined public lecture and amateur drama, because of the difference in their operating styles, although both of them appear at the public. Proletarian-amateur theater had to unlike lectures had to raise funds fulfilling the cultural needs of the masses, and thus rather was a tool. Proletarian-amateur theater was closer in nature to dance, music, and moving pictures than lectures.

It is noteworthy that the political issues contained in the proletarian-amateur theater made it controlled under the inspection of the police. Amateur theater was generally regarded as a “camouflaged” or “potential” gathering. As the socialist ideology became widely spread, the danger latent in the proletarian-amateur theater was regarded serious, and thus it was a constant target for the police surveillance and its events were frequently restricted according to their preemptive containment strategy. It was not the scenario that the censorship authorities did not allow amateur theater performances,\(^{34}\) but was the potential political risks associated with such “gatherings”.\(^{35}\) When amateur theater was prepared as a part of a celebratory ceremony, the authorities either allowed\(^{36}\) or banned\(^{37}\) only the drama. The fundamental purpose of the police authorities was to reduce the effect of the gatherings.

The main point is that among the organizers of the amateur theater performances there were those inside and those outside of the legal system of the colonial government.\(^{38}\) As a result, while politically safe amateur theater continued to be successful during the late 1920s—early 1930s, politically dangerous proletarian-amateur theater gradually waned. The use of subversive bundle sale methods became increasingly difficult during the late 1920s as police authorities began to base their decision according to the political nature of the organizing group.\(^{39}\) Nevertheless, proletarian-amateur theater remained alive until the mid-1930s, while its destiny

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33 “Students’ mobilize to help their hometowns,” Tonga ilbo, Aug. 22, 1929; “Pyŏngwŏn Tennis Contest ends on a high note,” Chosŏn ilbo, Aug. 22, 1929.

34 It is highly possible that preemptive censorship was in fact carried out based on the synopsis.

35 For more on the issue of the censorship of amateur theater, please refer to Lee Seung-hee 2007:448-457.

36 “New Labor Union Amateur Theater,” Tonga ilbo, May 19, 1927. The New Labor Union in Puŏk-ch’ŏng’s Sinch’ang Port in Hamnam Province planned to host a meeting to celebrate May Day. However, the police authorities prohibited them from doing so, only allowing the accompanying amateur theater performance to go ahead.

37 “Labor union banned from staging amateur theater performance,” Chumgŏe ilbo, May 25, 1928. In this particular instance, the staging of an amateur theater performance slated to coincide with the ceremony marking the opening of a labor union in Chŏnbuuk Province was prevented from going ahead as planned.

38 Lee Seung-hee 2007:454. Pak Hŏnho pointed out that theater censorship was a system used to directly instill notions of legality within colonial society. For more on this issue, please refer to Pak Hŏnho 2005.
was being determined by that of the organizing group. This change is clearly illustrated in the following examples.

The first example which can be raised in this regard is the incident involving an amateur theater performance by the Hakchung office of the Sŏngjin Youth Association in Hambuk Province in 1929. The Hakchung office planned to stage amateur theater performances during the Ch'usŏk holiday. They prepared two plays: *Kapsan hwajŏnmin* [Slash-and-burn farmers in Kapsan] and *Musanja ŭi muri* [The Proletarian Crowd]. While *Kapsan hwajŏnmin* was staged as planned on the first day of the event, September 18, seven members of the organizing committee were subsequently arrested the next day and six of them were convicted for having “Negatively impacted public order by fomenting a consciousness of the struggle against the bourgeois class and promoting a negative attitude toward modern politics in front of an audience of 300.” Here, special attention needs to be drawn to the fact that one of these six people was an individual named Hŏ Yangbok who subsequently served as the brains behind two separate incidents, the first of its kind, during the early 1930s involving the Sŏngjin Farmers’ Union in Hambuk Province. Hŏ Yangbok, who was in charge of matters pertaining to education, publication and politics within the Sŏngjin Farmers’ Union, was actively involved in the Sŏngjin Farmer's Union’s publication and distribution of a journal called *Pinnong* (September 1932-January 1933, total five editions). Hŏ was sentenced to prison for four years for having violated the tenets of the Public Order Act.

Two aspects are noteworthy. First, the Hakchung office made an active use of the issue of slash-and-burn farmers in Kapsan, which had already become a major social problem by 1929. The only play extant that uses this incident as its main theme is Yi T’aejun’s *San saramdŭl* [The Dwellers in the Mountain](1936). Yi’s play depicts the risky life of slash-and-burn farmers in a tragic manner. The prompt reaction of the Hakchung office of the Sŏngjin Youth Association to this incident, ignored by literary and theatrical circles, serves as a clear reminder of the intrinsic value of proletarian-amateur theater. Second, but more importantly, proletarian-amateur theater after the late 1920s existed within a network through which leftwing-oriented youth movements eventually became connected to the revolutionary labor unions that emerged in the 1930s. Although references to proletarian-amateur theater became increasingly difficult to find in the newspapers during the 1930s, the above-

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39 “Amateur theater organized under a group umbrella to be prohibited, only those works organized by individuals to be permitted,” *Chungoe ilbo*, Sep. 28, 1929(Yŏngsan office of the Naju Youth Association, Chŏnnam Province).

40 “Seven members of the Sŏngjin Youth Association sent to the prosecutor's office,” *Chosŏn ilbo*, Oct. 18, 1929; “Six members of the Sŏngjin Youth Association convicted,” *Tonga ilbo*, Nov. 13, 1929; “All parties involved in the Sŏngjin theater incident found guilty,” *Chosŏn ilbo*, Nov. 17, 1929; “Six-month sentences handed out for the staging of Hwajŏnmin,” *Tonga ilbo*, Nov. 26, 1929.

41 Yŏ Sŏngjong and Hŏ Yongmun were also involved in this incident. For more on the Sŏngjin Farmers’ Union incident, please refer to the following sources: “12 members of the Sŏngjin Farmer's Union arrested,” *Tonga ilbo*, Sep. 11, 1931; “80 people, including members of the farmers' union, youth corps, and boy scouts are arrested,” *Chosŏn ilbo*, Sep. 14, 1931; “Women members sentenced,” *Tonga ilbo*, May 3, 1932; “Arrest of the ringleaders of the Sŏngjin Farmer's Union incident,” *Tonga ilbo*, Mar. 21, 1933; “Organization mobilizes 2,000 farmers a mere half year after its establishment,” *Chosŏn ilbo*, Oct. 16, 1934; “Report on the public trial for the second Sŏngjin Farmer's Union incident,” *Tonga ilbo*, May 16, 1935.
mentioned case shows that the proletarian-amateur theater cannot be assumed to have been absolutely retrenched. Rather, while the sphere in which the popular socialist-influenced proletarian-amateur theater of the 1920s could operate was contracted in the 1930s, its identity as socialist actually became much clearer and it increasingly focused on the reflection of the elements of actual life. In this regard, the amateur theater incident involving the Tanch’ón Boy Scouts Association is clear evidence that the actions of individuals directly involved in the Sŏngjin Farmer’s Union Incident such as Hŏ Yangbok, Yŏ Sŏngjong, and Hŏ Yongmun were not accidental.

During the Taeborŭm holiday in 1931 five members of the Tanch’ón Boy Scouts Associations of Hamnam Province, including Kim Tŏgyun, put on a theater performance entitled *Chabon’ga tae nodongja* [Capitalists versus Laborers]. When the police authorities caught wind that such an event had been staged in mid June 1931, they promptly arrested the above-mentioned five individuals for having staged “a radical proletarian-amateur theater performance.” While three of the men were released, the other two were remitted to the court.42 The fact that it took the police authorities six months to discover that staging such a performance can be taken to mean that the members of the Tanch’ón Boy Scouts Association did not even attempt to obtain permission from the authorities. In addition, the fact that the holding of this play managed to evade the police for as long as it lasted implies that scale of the performance must have been somewhat small. That being the case, the question becomes how the staging of this performance did eventually come to the attention of the police authorities. The answer lies in the widespread arrests made in the aftermath of the so-called Tanch’ón Farmer’s Union Incident that began on May 9, 1931. As a result of this incident, some 400 members of the Tanch’ón Farmers’ Union, Tanch’ón Youth Association, and Tanch’ón Boy Scouts Association were found arrested. During the ensuing investigation process, the fact that the above-mentioned proletarian-amateur theater performance had been staged came to light. Furthermore, many other instances in which proletarian-amateur theater performances had been staged by the Kwangch’ón Namgu and Pokkwi Tonggu Offices of the Tanch’ón Farmers’ Union were also revealed during this investigation process. The performances which were reported to have been staged included the *Pak Yŏngsik ŭi kajŏng* [Pak Yŏngsik’s Family], *Uridul ŭi sal kil* [Our Way to Live], *Sahoe xx* [xx Society], *Sojagin chohap* [Peasants’ Union], *Sanha iru* [A Friend in the World], and *Yŏngja ŭi chugŭmu* [Yŏngja’s Death].43 Similar cases were also reported elsewhere.44

42 “Tanch’ón Boy Scout performed a proletarian-amateur theater, two of them were remitted to the court,” *Chosŏn ilbo*, Jul. 14, 1931.

43 “Preliminary trial to be held in connection with Tanch’ón Farmers’ Union Incident (5),” *Chosŏn chungang ilbo*, Aug. 28, 1933; “Outline of group’s subversive activities revealed during preliminary hearing,” *Tonga ilbo*, Sep. 15, 1933.

44 As can be seen from the Kyŏngju Red Peasants Union Incident of 1934(or Red Reading Club Incident), amateur theater represented one of farmers unions most commonly utilized activities. For more on this issue, please refer to newspaper articles related to the outbreak of this incident and the actual trial from January 1935 to the end of 1936. Special attention should also be paid to the cases raised by An Kwanghui involving secret organizations as well as Red Peasants Unions. In this regard, please refer to An Kwanghui 2001:68-69.
In areas where youth movements and red peasants unions were not active, such as the Songjin and Tanch’ön areas, night schools filled their shoes. Here, the staging of Kwak Chaesul’s Chidowôn ŭi kangyŏn [An Instructor’s Lecture] (original title: Nongch’on haengjin’gok) [March of Farmers] at a night school in Chindo, Chŏnnam Province in 1934 can be introduced as a salient example. On April 17, 1934 a Chindo Peasants Union was established. Based on the ideology, attempting to do away with the private property system, this organization established the overthrow of the landowner class and the stabilization of farmers’ lives as their overarching objectives. However, due to the weakness of its substructure and basis for the mobilization of the public, the organization was dissolved on August 1, 1934. Kwak Chaesul, who had been one of the core members of the Chindo Peasants Union, continued his activities through the night school even after the dissolution of the peasant union. It was in this capacity that he staged the above-mentioned amateur theater performance on August 23-24, 1934. However, the staging of this performance was accidently revealed to the police authority along with the existence of the Chindo Red Peasants Union. As a result, Kwak Chaesul and three other individuals were arrested for having violated the Public Order Act and sentenced to a 30-month prison term in March 1936.

Chidowôn ŭi kangyŏn, only proletarian-amateur theater scenario extant, criticizes Japan’s policy of developing the rural areas characterized by the regularly expounded upon themes of the improvement of agriculture and promotion of austerity and thriftiness. However, this scenario did not contain any references to serious social conflicts, propaganda elements, or the socialist sinp’a drama. Rather, amidst a script that does not feature any main character responsible for conveying the tale that is about to unfold, the scenario calmly attempts to change the perception of the audience by refuting the logic of Japan’s agricultural development policy so pivotal to the lives of farmers. This was a trend that is also evidenced by the sudden appearance of a young man (Yun Ch’angho from Kyŏngsŏng), who can clearly be seen as a reflection of Kwak Chaesul himself. Although this style was not common, attention should be drawn to the fact that this style, including a change in perception that was being sought while excluding all emotions from the discourse, is a manifestation of the characteristics of the proletarian-amateur theater at this particular point in time. In addition, this situation also reveals that amidst circumstances characterized by a shortage of organizations which represented the interests of farmers, night schools undertook the mission acting like an organization.

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45 For more on the activities of the Red Peasants Unions as well as their movement, please refer to Chi Sugŏl 1993.
46 This play first came to light in 1986, see Yi Chongbŏm 1986. A translated version was subsequently published in Kim Chaesŏk 1993.
47 Yi Chongbŏm 1986:80-86.
48 “Four members of Chindo Farmer’s Union sentenced to prison time even at the second trial,” Tonga ilbo, Mar. 3, 1936.
49 With regard to the Chidowôn ŭi kangyŏn, please refer to Kang Yonghŏi and Yi Yongmi 1989; Kim Chaesŏk 1992; Lee Seung-hee 1996.
police regarded this performance as having been designed to expose that the poverty in rural society had its roots in the problems of the current social system. However, so their reasoning went, the agricultural development movement encouraged by the government was a policy implemented by a capitalist country that was designed to deceive people. The improvement of agricultural technology and promotion of austerity and thriftiness encouraged by the government authorities would only result in the hungry masses of Chosôn, trapped in a situation where while more work was demanded, their essential needs such as food would continue to be unaddressed. Thus, we can surmise that the Japanese police in fact were well aware of the core objectives of this amateur theater performance.

Proletarian-amateur theater was an absent presence that could only exist with subversive bundle sale methods. The spirit of the 1920s has now become a matter of the past, which marked by the formation of proletarian-amateur theater under socialist influence and its subsequent merger with other types of amateur theater under the cultural consensus of “commiseration”. While awkwardly coexisting with the sinp’a style and attempting to some extent to change the public’s taste, proletarian-amateur theater project became an existence which had to be hidden in the realm subversive bundle sale methods.

**The Politics of Space and the Biological Memory of Individuals**

While the attempts to control proletarian-amateur theater were largely effective, other forms of amateur theater which existed within the legal space also began to be regarded dangerous. Although the characteristics of amateur theater remained largely the same as what they had been during the 1920s, significant changes drove proletarian-amateur theater into the calamitous phase. The colonial forces kept a close watch on all suspected organizations and they smashed any organization that was deemed ideologically threatening, while trying to convert them on the other hand. Amateur theater was regarded politically safe and thus no control would seemed necessary. Nevertheless, amateur theater as a whole turned to appear to have violated the principle of self-reliance and made a non-educational but profit action in the name of contributions. It was against this backdrop that the Public Security Bureau of Kyŏnggi Province revealed its intention to impose regulations on amateur theater and its performances. As a result, the passion that had ignited a flame on amateur theater during the 1920s became increasingly difficult to find in the early and mid-1930s, and had all but disappeared by 1937.

The focal point in terms of the colonial policy towards amateur theater was already by the late 1920s firmly fixated on the problem of “gatherings”. Every excuse was used to preemptively sabotage the staging of amateur theater performances.

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50 The Koryŏ Youth Association in Kaesŏng, which had continuously staged amateur theater performances since the early 1920s, held the 1st National Amateur Theater Contest in 1935. “Kaesŏng amateur theater contest postponed until the 23rd,” Tonga ilbo, Nov. 16, 1935; “First-ever amateur theater contest held in Kaesŏng comes to a successful end,” Chosŏn ilbo, Dec. 22, 1935.

51 “Staging of amateur theater performances regarded as being in violation of the notion of self-reliance,” Chosŏn ilbo, Feb. 25, 1933.
Meanwhile, both legal and illegal means were used to sabotage them and such a method seemed effective. However, in the aftermath of the Manchurian Incident of 1931, any amateur theater performance had to be banned not to take a risk of it turning into a gathering. The status of amateur theater of the mid 1930s can be regarded as the result of the change in colonial policy. Henceforth, amateur theater was, precisely after 1937, has been reborn as a Japanese imperialist tool, to be used for bolstering the colonial system. Amateur theater raised funds for national defense, and promoted ideological propaganda such as the need to defend the empire from the spread of communism. Colonial Japan now was the main organizer of charity performances designed to for relieving the people from the natural disasters. As such, while the emergence of proletarian-amateur theater was indigenous, its collapse was forcibly brought about by the colonial power.

However, this phenomenon was in reality part of a more important and complicated situation that cannot simply be summarized as the emergence and collapse of proletarian-amateur theater. Rather, this phenomenon can be perceived as having been an intricate part of the colonial power’s scheme toward proletarian theater as a whole.

As mentioned above, proletarian-amateur theater was able to flexibly maintain socialist project within a cultural sphere in which the sense of commiseration and the need for social reform coexisted up until it was pushed back into the realm of illegal space. This flexibility made possible a strategic performativity that included the use of subversive bundle sale methods; moreover, small benefits could be earned under the name of amateur theater. However, from the late 1920s onwards, proletarian-amateur theater found its flexibility being curtailed. Every proletarian-amateur theater performance came to be regarded as a political exercise and as a “camouflaged” or “potential” gathering. However, it was precisely at this time that many proletarian theater companies were established nationwide. Of course, the presence of KAPF proved to be the decisive force behind the establishment of the majority of these companies. While the theater and films were the collective result of a large array of

52 “Regulations imposed on amateur theater’s naked pursuit of profits,” Choson chungang ilbo, Oct. 9, 1933.
55 “Amateur theater performance staged as part of efforts to provide relief to those affected by the recent natural disaster,” Choson ilbo, Dec. 7, 1939; “Amateur theater performance staged as part of efforts to provide relief to those affected by the recent natural disaster proves to be a marked success,” Choson ilbo, Dec. 20, 1939.
human resources, the KAPF represented the center of the human network that oversaw the actualization of this proletarian theater movement. Moreover, while proletarian-amateur theater had during the 1920s absorbed the socialist desires and planning when the organizational, material, and human basis needed to implement a professional proletarian theater movement as it was absent, it was these very proletarian theater companies that emerged to play such a role from the late 1920s onwards.

The chronological order between the proletarian-amateur theater and the advent of proletarian theater companies can be understood as a natural process. In the 1920s amateur theater was the main actor in the history of proletarian theater in Korea; however, the wish for the establishment of professional proletarian theater was being realized. However, these expectations were summarily dashed. Much like the Japanese colonial power adopted a two-faceted attitude toward amateur theater in terms of proletarian and non proletarian, proletarian theater also applied a two-pronged strategy: cutting off the center from the periphery. Proletarian-amateur theater was more actively carried out in local areas than in the capital city of Seoul and the constant pressure and censorship on the part of the Japanese colonial authorities allowed some proletarian dramas in local areas. Thus it is important to point out that while Kyōngsŏng(Seoul) constituted the most advanced region of Chosŏn society, it was the local areas that represented the sphere in which proletarian theater, including proletarian-amateur theater, made the biggest waves.

This situation may very well have been the result from the ideological censorship that was most strictly implemented in Seoul because the latter was perceived as the most advanced cultural sphere. Indeed, theater censorship was first institutionalized in the Kyŏnggi Province and the censorship practiced here has become the parameters for controlling other areas. Kyŏngsŏng was exposed to many more cultural forms than other areas naturally resulted in the low demand for proletarian theater than it was in local areas. Conversely, the marked absence of the wide range of cultural forms found in the capital all but ensured that the demand for amateur theater would be relatively higher in local areas than what it was in the center. As far as theater censorship was concerned, its flexible application in accordance with the circumstances surrounding a particular theater performance’s performativity meant that the latter enjoyed more flexibility. Under these conditions, it was only natural that proletarian theater proved to be more dynamic in local areas than in Kyŏngsŏng. On top of this, proletarian theater took on a different appearance based on the regional differences that emerged within the socialist movement over the issue of the organizational basis that was needed to make the proletarian theater movement possible.

The appearance of such differences between the center and periphery in the operations of the proletarian theater can be regarded as a natural denouement. Much like the debate between the central and local offices of the KAPF regarding the performance of Minado Theater Company in 1931, the differences between the center and periphery led to a gap in terms of their respective positions vis-à-vis the identity and strategy which should be used to implement proletarian theater. There is no doubt that by this point in 1931, proletarian theater was in decline.
However, for those who had witnessed or directly orchestrated the activities that had led to the rapid progression of proletarian theater in local areas, these KAPF thespians from the center were in effect downgrading proletarian theater to the status of a mere showpiece in an exhibition.

Another factor noteworthy is that of the intervention of the colonial power. More to the point, while the police authorities sought to completely defang the proletarian theater movement in the center, on the other hand they exalted the proletarian theater movement as a form of artistic practice of the elite.

The existence of such a framework can be inferred from the political situation that prevailed during the early 1930s marked by the widespread emergence of KAPF member-centered theater companies. The Small Travelling Troupe ambitiously organized in 1931 was forced to tour local areas because they were not permitted to perform in the capital area. It was subsequently dissolved upon its return to Kyŏngsŏng. However, the Megaphone Theater organized in the spring of 1932 was permitted to stage a play in the capital for two days. The fact that the Megaphone Theater was allowed to do something which the Small Travelling Troupe had been prevented from doing could have been a deliberate political choice of the colonial authorities. In this regard, the police could easily have banned the Megaphone Theater from carrying out such a performance if it had so desired. The decision to permit the Megaphone Theater to carry out a performance was clearly taken as part of a wider plan. To this end, the actual intention of the colonial authorities was clearly exposed by its actions taken in conjunction with the Sin'gŏnsŏl Theater's performance of Sŏbu chŏnsŏn isang ōpta [There Are No Problems on the Western Front] in November 1933. While the performance was initially supposed to be held at the Paejae Grand Hall, the police authorities refused to allow the performance to be staged in this locale. In the end, the event was staged at the Ponjŏng Yŏnyegwan (previously the Kyŏngsŏng Theater).57 This act can be interpreted as having been motivated by the police authorities' desire to limit the influence which this performance carried. However, the decision to force a change in the performance venue should be perceived as having had a more profound significance. In reality, this decision represented an artful choice on the part of police authorities who were keenly aware that the significance of a performance differed depending on the space in which proletarian theater was arranged.58

56 The debate began with Min Pyŏnghw'i's criticism of Pak Yŏnghŭi's labeling of the theater performance produced by Ch'oe Sŭngil of the Minado Theater Company as the “first march of proletarian theater.” Min Pyŏnghw'i criticized Ch'oe Sŭngil's works for being reactionary in nature, and took issue with what he perceived as the class-oriented nature of both the performers and audience, as well as the space in which the performance was staged. Min's assertions were rooted in his fundamental distrust of the committee members of KAPF's central office. For more on this argument and the KAPF theater movement during this period, please refer to Yang Sŏngguk 1996:81-96.

57 “Sin'gŏnsŏl Theater to perform at the Ponjŏng Yŏnyegwan on November 23 and 24”, Tonga ilbo, Nov. 22, 1933.

58 There is another important reason why the KAPF literature movement effectively ended with the Sin'gŏnsŏl Theater Incident of 1934. However, as a separate study could be conducted on this topic, only the politics of space were introduced in the current study.
The application of the politics of space to proletarian theater was designed to not only divide the local and central areas, but also to control performativity by effectively separating political practices from artistic ones. As a result, proletarian-amateur theater, which had been camouflaged within the space known as subversive bundle sale methods that revolved around local areas, found itself with little other choice but to fade away. Meanwhile, proletarian theater, while also subversive, had no choice but to become a relatively safer artistic practice if it was to ensure its survival. To this end, the two-day performance staged by the Sin’gōnsōl Theater was eventful in that it not only marked the crystallization of the efforts and capabilities of the center, but also provided propaganda for proletarian theater. However, it in fact marked the funeral of the proletarian theater movement.

The ignominious manner in which the proletarian theater and proletarian-amateur theater movements disappeared during the colonial era naturally raises questions about the actual extent of the influence of these cultural forms. Such skepticism is especially prevalent in the case of proletarian-amateur theater. The performing art known as theater has been regarded as a once-and-for-all art form that cannot be repeated. However, the situation is even more critical in the case of proletarian-amateur theater in that there exist practically no records (drama scenarios, production notes, etc.) or human resources (actors, producers, and other staffs) which could be used to restore or convey the actual value of this intangible cultural form. More to the point, proletarian-amateur theater existed during an era in which it could not take ownership of the elements it needed to ensure its survival. Proletarian-amateur theater was able to come into contact with large segments of the population via the socialist appropriation of sin’p’a dramas as well as the use of subversive bundle sale methods and aggressive “planning”. However, having become camouflaged in an illegal space, it eventually disappeared. This creates the impression that proletarian-amateur theater, much like a mirage, accidently appeared during a specific phase of history only to disappear shortly thereafter. Thus, attempts to identify the actual legacy of proletarian-amateur theater without any actual material proof can be regarded by some to represent an exercise in futility.

However, the experiences created by a cultural form never truly disappear. The vestiges of such cultural experiences are preserved in the biological memories of individuals who either as members of the audience or performers, participated in this collective experience. Although the government-led amateur theater which emerged during the late 1930s featured a structure which was identical to that of proletarian-amateur theater, there was no way that this government-led amateur theater could have been perceived as a continuation of the proletarian-amateur theater that they had experienced in the past. In all likelihood, what they perceived was the overall difference in the political orientation of these performances. Although subconsciously incorporated as an inactive form of energy, the values attached to these cultural experiences would not disappear. This was in fact a cultural memory which could be reactivated when the time was right.

The existence of the biological memory of individuals, a most mysterious of spheres, is indeed difficult to prove. However, the possibility of its existence can in many ways be indirectly ascertained. First, many of the socialist notions which
had first been encountered during the proletarian-amateur theater experience were simultaneously and continuously produced by other forms of media. In other words, the once-and-for-all existence of proletarian-amateur theater could be complemented by the literary gossip that appeared in newspapers during the mid-1920s, the continuous flow of original dramas which, although never performed, were published, and various films and novels. Thus, these other media tools provided individuals with physical access to socialist notions which had originally been experienced through proletarian-amateur theater. The need to consider the other socialist cultural practices which coexisted with proletarian-amateur theater stems from the fact that although each of these genres was unique in their own right, the socialist epistemology eventually resulted in their general convergence in what became the main ideological current of the day. Proletarian-amateur theater thus consisted of a socialist culture that was created amidst a network that linked it with other cultural practices. To this end, the assumption can be made that the cultural memory which was formed through this process was in fact preserved.

Viewed from this standpoint, the revival of proletarian-amateur theater after national liberation in 1945 can thus be perceived as having been the activation of this biological memory. All at once, the long suppressed desire to express such memories exploded. In their capacity as the central organization involved in this process, leftwing theater organizations converged together to further stoke the fire created by this passion. Proletarian-amateur theater during the post-liberation period was more developed from an organizational standpoint than it had been during the colonial era, so much so in fact that it was deserving of the name “movement”. In South Korea, the first Independent Theater Contest was held in July 1947. Organized by the Seoul Office of the Korea Theater Association, the contest featured 23 theater companies. In North Korea, a worker’s theater contest was also planned under the auspices of the North Korean Literary Arts Association. Although the importance of amateur theater had already been emphasized by leftwing thespians during the colonial era, it was during this subsequent period that the actual legacy of amateur theater was began to perform realistic use.

59 For more on amateur theater during the liberation period, please refer to Yang Sungguk 1989; Yi Sŏngman 1993; Lee Seung-hee 1996.

60 For more on the debate surrounding KAPF’s amateur theater, please refer to Yang Sungguk 1996:117-122.

ABBREVIATION

KAPF Korea Artista Proleta Federatio
| Anam-dong | 長岩洞 | Kyŏnggi | 京畿 |
| Ch'angson | 長生 | Kyŏngju | 慶州 |
| Chemulp'o | 濟物浦 | Kyŏngnam | 慶南(慶尚南道) |
| Chindo | 珍島 | Kyŏngsŏng | 京城 |
| Chinnamp'o | 鎭南浦 | Masan | 馬山 |
| Ch'oe Sùngil | 崔承一 | Min Pyŏnghwai | 閔丙徽 |
| Chŏkho | 赤虎 | Minadojwasin'gŭkpu | 미나도좌 新劇部 |
| chŏn | 錢 | Chŏnbuk | 全北(全羅北道) |
| ch'ŏngnyŏnhoehoe | 青年會 | Hambuk | 咸北(咸鏡北道) |
| Chŏnnoam | 全南(全羅南道) | Hamhŭng | 咸興 |
| Chŏnson | 朝鮮 | Hamnam | 咸南(咸鏡南道) |
| Ch'ungbuk | 忠北(忠清北道) | Hanyŏng | 漢勇 |
| Ch'usŏk | 秋夕 | Hŏ Yangbok | 許良福 |
| gut | 陣 | Hŏ Yongmun | 許容文 |
| Hakchung | 鶴中 | Hyŏn Sŏng'wan | 玄聖完 |
| Hambuk | 咸北(咸鏡北道) | Im Sŏnggu | 林聖九 |
| Hamhŭng | 咸興 | Inch'on | 仁川 |
| Hamnam | 咸南(咸鏡南道) | Kabuki | 歌舞伎 |
| Kae-gwa ch'ŏnsŏn | 改過遷善 | kaegwa ch'ŏnsŏn | 改過遷善 |
| Kaesŏng | 開城 | Kim Hyŏngyang (Kim Song) | |
| Kim Togyun | 金德潤 | Kim Togyun | 金德潤 |
| Kim Tosan | 金陶山 | Kim Togyun | 金陶山 |
| Kim Yongbo | 金泳浦 | Koch'ang Kigong | 高敞技工 |
| Kohak-tang | 興學堂 | Kongbogyo | 公善校 |
| Kongbogyo | 公善校 | Koryŏ | 高麗 |
| Kwac Ch'aesul | 郷在旭 | Kwangch'ŏn Namgu | 廣泉南區 |
| Kwangju | 光州 | Kwangju | 光州 |
| Kwangju-wa | 光州座 | Kyŏngbuk | 慶北(慶尚北道) |
| Kyŏngguk | 京畿 | Kyŏngju | 慶州 |
| Kyŏngnam | 慶南(慶尚南道) | Kyŏngsŏng | 京城 |
| Masan | 馬山 | Min Pyŏnghwai | 閔丙徽 |
| Min Pyŏnghwai | 閔丙徽 | Minadojwasin'gŭkpu | 미나도좌 新劇部 |
| Munch'on-gun | 文川郡 | Naju | 羅州 |
| Nonsan | 論山 | Onori | 五老里 |
| Önyang | 彥陽 | Pak Yŏnghŭi | 朴英熙 |
| Pokkwi Tonggu | 福貴東區 | Ponjong Yongegwan | 本町 演藝館 |
| Pyŏngbuk | 平北(平安北道) | Pyŏngnam | 平南(平安南道) |
| Pyŏngwŏn | 平原 | Sanggich'ŏn-myŏn | 上岐川面 |
| Sin'gŏnsŏl (Theater) | (劇團) 新建設 | Sin'gŭk | 素人劇 |
| Sokch'o | 東草 | Sŏnch'ŏn | 宣川 |
| Sŏngjin | 城津 | Suwŏn | 水原 |
| Taeburŭm | 大邱壘 | Tanch'on | 端川 |
| Tano | 端午 | Tongch'ŏn | 通川 |
| Tongch'ŏn | 通川 | Tongmin (Theater) | 東民(劇團) |
| Tongmyŏng | 東明 | Ulsan | 蔚山 |
| Wŏn | 圓 | Wŏnsan'gwan | 元山館 |
| Yi Kise | 李基世 |
이성환
이태俊
양성종
용동
용궁포
용정송실시점
용농
용산
윤창호
윤백남

TITLES OF LITERARY WORKS

Amya
暗夜
Angna ū chǒju
悪鬼의 訴呪
Arirang kogae
阿里郎歌
A ū mo
我의 母
Ch’ōndol sunhwan
天道循環
Ch’ohon ū p’ye
早婚의 罪
Chabon’ga tae nodongja
資本家對勞動者
Chaebongch’un
再逢春
Chaeya ū chongso
除夜의 燈火
Changhammong
長恨夢
Chidowon ū kangy on
指導員的 講演
Chingak poün
懲惡報恩
Chiok
地狱
Chisōng ū sorì
知性的 尋常
Chölc’hō pongsaeng
絶處逢生
Chōngch’i sammae
情痴三味
Chumginya?
主僕呢?
Hūimang ū nunnul
希望的 遲暮
Huimujong
嘻無情
Huīsaeng
犠牲
Hwajōnmın
火田民
Hwanggūnguk
黃金國
Hwanggūm sesang
黃金世土
Hyōhan ū kwang
血汗的 光
Hyōngtac’uū
兄弟大義
Ich’ūng ū sanai
依終的 事事
Ipjī-nūn sŏnggong ū mo
立志是 成功的 母
Iū ū uirī
二友的 義理
Kapsan hwajōmnín
甲山火田民
Kojin kamnae
苦盡甘來
Kosōng
高聲
Kûch’alla
戱可嘗
Kuklyōng
國境
Kwihyang ū poksu
歸鄉的 復讐
Kwŏnsŏn chingak
勤善慚忌

Kyegūp t’ap’a
階級打破
Mimong
迷夢
Misin-ūl t’ap’ahara
迷信來打破者
Mongiunmong
夢中夢
Musanja ū muri
無産者의 票理
Na ū choe
나의 罪
Nodong sinsŏng
勞動神聖
Nodongja ū chugūm
勞動者의 獻曲
Nongch’o haengjin’gok
農村行進曲
Nu ū kwang
淚の 光
Nun onün pam
 눈오는 밤
Paekse poün
百世報恩
Pak Ch’ōmji
朴僕知
Pak Yōngsik ū kajōng
朴永식的 家庭
Pinnong
貧農
Ponch’ō ū paktae
本妻的 薄待
Poün
報恩
Puhọja ū hoegae
步遊者’s 悔改
Purangja ū mallo
浮浪者의 末路
Sahoe xx
社會xx
San saramdul
三日本人
Sanha iru
山下一家
Siin ū kajōng
詩人的 家庭
Siin ū kamjŏng
詩人的 感情
Sink’almaen
新刊
Sŏbu ch’ŏngnyŏn
西部青年
Sŏbu chŏnsŏn isang ópta
西部戦線 上상 않다
Proletarian-Amateur Theater

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