

Yi Sang's "Lingering Impressions of a Mountain Village"

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Despite the more than seventy years of nearly constant popular and academic attention given to his life and works since his passing, Yi Sang (1910-1937) remains something of an enigma. This may largely be due to the fact that much of his poetry and prose fiction was not meant to communicate with the outside world any more than is a diary. Conversely, his essays, despite the relative neglect they have received from the scholarly establishment, are in form and content deliberate attempts to articulate. It is in his essays that Yi, to the degree that he ever does, provides unequivocal information, both about his internal states and about the everyday life of the societies in which he operated. The present essay, "Lingering Impressions of a Mountain Village," provides us with one fascinating expression of Yi Sang and his world.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of this essay, at least from a post-1945 perspective, is its complete insistence on Yi's own very personal, decidedly non-national identity. A large part of (South) Korea's post-liberation history—literary and otherwise—has been devoted to making a heterogeneous population appear homogenous under the totalizing rubric of nation. The word for individualism (개인주의 *kaein chu'ui*) was until quite recently a pejorative term. In fact, among many Koreans it still retains many negative associations. Of course, this is partially due to a misconstrual of the word to mean egoism, but it is also intimately connected to the word's connotations of interests or actions that might not coincide with fascistic orders toward uniformity. Yi flouts such artificial attempts to obscure the diversity that characterized colonial Korean society in the 1930s. He writes not as a Korean, or as a Japanese for that matter, but as an individual. And he dedicates much of "Lingering Impressions" to mapping out and securing his personal predilections, often in opposition to both pre- and post-1945 nationalist expectations.