

“Self-Narrative” in Late Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Korean Literature

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Abstrak

The late 19th to early 20th century was a period of great transformation in Korean literature. However, change was also accompanied by continuity, with works that inherited or utilized the styles of pre-modern periods existing alongside works of a new stylistic form. This was the situation for “self-narrative” works which looked back upon, recorded and evaluated the meaning of a person’s life. Prior to the modern period, works that took the writer’s own life as the subject matter were rare in traditional East Asian literature as the European tradition of writing confessions was absent. As a result, the autobiography, in the European sense, did not exist. Nevertheless, self-narrative works which took on the forms of other pre-existing literary genres can be observed. Examples of self-narrative works which utilized traditional literary forms can also be found in the Korean literature of the late 19th to early 20th century. These works differ from European autobiographies in terms their objectivity and style their characteristic features are the way in which the historical circumstances of the time, which are not harmonious, are reflected and how the transformation of the social group, rather than the individual, is emphasized. On the other hand, self-narrative works which adopted new literary styles from Europe or Japan also began to appear, produced by individuals who had become familiar with the Christian tradition or who had studied abroad. Examples of this can be found in the works of An Jung-gŏn, Jang ŏngjin and Yi Kwangsu which demonstrate the adoption of new techniques that allow confessions or the disclosure of the writer’s inner side. These new forms of self-narrative cannot be regarded, in terms of their content and theme, as representing a development but their unique significance cannot be denied as well.