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The cover image is sunset in Seoul along the Cheonggyecheon stream. Image by Stefan K on Unsplash.

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FEATURE (PEER REVIEW)

WOMEN AND URBAN WATERWAYS IN KOREAN MODERNIST LITERATURE

By Anne Whitehouse

Editor's note: This feature article has been peer reviewed.

To understand and address our twenty-first century environmental crises, unraveling the nuances of river-human relationships in the urban setting is a crucial multidisciplinary endeavor. Not only are issues like climate change, air quality, urban heat islands, and urban biodiversity at stake in this work, but also

the well-being of urban human populations. We might begin to tease out some of these river-human interactions by asking the following questions: What kinds of unique relationships do humans have with rivers and streams in urban environments? How have these relationships changed over time? What benefits and damages



Women working at a laundry site at Ch'onggye Stream, circa 1930s.

are experienced by both parties? How do urban rivers impact human culture and society, and how do human institutions impact those urban rivers in return? How do we reimagine these river-human relationships in ways that are sustainable, reciprocal, and fulfilling?

Literature can be a versatile and illuminating tool to explore an ecological relationality that includes humans. The literary arts allow us to play out innovative thought experiments on the page, to attempt to reimagine the future of ecological relationships and landscapes, including urban waterways, in ways that are more sustainable, inclusive, life-affirming, or simply different from how they currently are (Buell, Heise, and Thornber 418). Perhaps even more importantly, literature has the capacity to probe ambiguity and contradiction in these relationships. In engaging such literary work, ecocriticism and the environmental humanities are well-situated to contribute to tackling the important work of understanding and transforming river-human relations in urban settings. Even historical literary negotiations of environmental and human interpersonal relationships can give us helpful insight into how we might reimagine our twenty-first-century environmental relationships with an eye towards intersectional issues of social equity and environmental justice.

Pak T'ae-wŏn's 1938 modernist novel *Scenes from Ch'ŏnggye Stream* (Ch'ŏnbyŏn p'unggyŏng, 천변풍경) is one thought-provoking example of these human-environment relationships in literature. *Scenes from Ch'ŏnggye Stream* provides an intimate portrayal of ordinary life for lower-class Koreans living along the Ch'ŏnggye Stream in a rapidly urbanizing and modernizing 1930s Seoul under Japanese occupation; it reveals how environmental, social, and political factors can mingle together to influence urban river environments and culture. In the novel, Pak puts neighborhood women at the center of streamside life, their gossiping while doing laundry in the stream being one of the few recurring images in an almost plotless story that loosely connects

an overwhelming number of characters. As the characters navigate the changes that come with colonially mediated modernization, they embody an innovative mixture of Korean traditions and modern opportunities that places value on social liberty and intimate relationships between family members and friends as well as between humans and the stream.

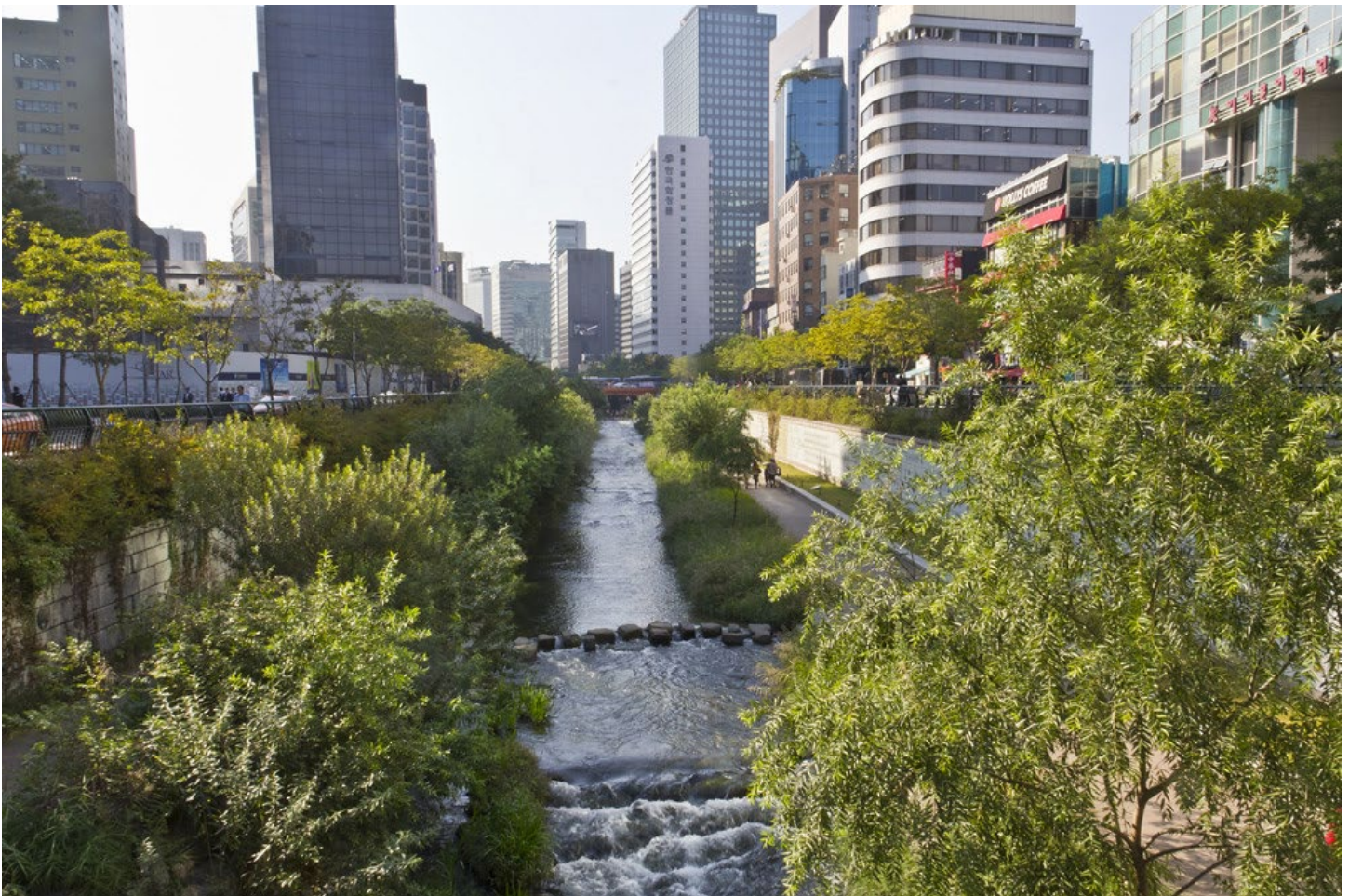
In drawing numerous parallels between women and Ch'ŏnggye Stream in the 1930s—a period of tremendous cultural change—Pak brings this administratively neglected yet culturally rich part of the city to life, emphasizing the multilayered dynamism of environmental and human relationships as well as drawing attention to a narrative of the stream and of Korean women that is full of nuance and complexity. Pak symbolically connects the novel's women and the stream as creators of gathering places where diverse characters build transformative relationships and meaningful communities in the bewilderment of a rapidly changing society.

In this piece, I use feminist ecocriticism—a discourse that draws connections between society's treatment of women and treatment of the environment—to illuminate these critical similarities between Pak's characterization of the female characters and Ch'ŏnggye Stream. I find feminist ecocriticism to be useful for reading *Scenes from Ch'ŏnggye Stream* because it has the capacity to unpack the intersectional nature of issues that connect the oppression of women, the exploitation of nature, and colonialism; it challenges dualistic thinking; it creates space for exploring the agency of the more-than-human; and it can effectively explore the “liberatory ideals” and “strategies of emancipation” presented through fiction and apply them to real-world needs and scenarios, generating “more hopeful ecological narratives” (Buell, Heise, and Thornber 424; Vakoch 3; Merchant 185). I will demonstrate how these ideas manifest through historical contextualization of the novel and close readings of a few passages from the novel.

Contemporary Context

The stream in question—Seoul’s Ch’onggye Stream—is not only central to Pak’s text, but particularly relevant to contemporary conversations about urban river restoration and daylighting. After decades of being buried under city streets and an elevated highway, Ch’onggye Stream was “restored” in 2003–2005. The restoration of Ch’onggye Stream—which flows through Seoul’s downtown and historic center—has often been cited domestically and internationally as an example of successful urban stream daylighting and of the creation of urban ecological space (Peterson). Urban planners and environmental engineers tend to esteem the Ch’onggye Stream restoration as an amazing feat

of urban revitalization, but many sociologists and other academics view the restoration more critically as, at best, having ambiguous impact. At worst, critics—notably including Myung-rae Cho, sociologist and former South Korean Minister of Environment—say the stream project represents an ecologically and historically vacant urban phenomenon that is more performative than it is restorative (Jeon and Kang 750; Cho). Some of the ecological criticisms of the project include the fact that a significant portion of the water in the restored stream is pumped in upstream from the Han River at great energetic and financial cost. Additionally, the streambed is mostly concrete and regularly cleaned, and the upstream half of



The “restored” Ch’onggye Stream, flowing through downtown Seoul. Image by Kaizer Rangwala, Flickr. (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

Ch'ŏnggye Stream and its mountain tributaries were not restored at all, continuing to disrupt the connectivity of the Ch'ŏnggye Stream ecology with Seoul's mountains (Cho 161). Some therefore call for the re-restoration of Ch'ŏnggye Stream in a way that takes the river's natural ecology and historical legacy into greater consideration instead of prioritizing political and economic motives (Jeon and Kang 753).

Literary critic Dooho Shin challenges Myung-Rae Cho and other academics' vehement disapproval of the restoration project, instead focusing on how the project combines ecological sensibilities with the practical needs of the urban environment. He also suggests that the perceived dichotomy between development and environmental conservation/preservation is rooted in South Korean social dynamics between activists and the development-driven dictatorial government that was overthrown in the late 1980s (Shin, Dooho 92-93). Activism, including environmental activism, was effectively silenced during the dictatorships of the mid 1950s-1980s, so the status of all activists being implicitly anti-establishment and anti-government continues to the present day.

However, Chihyung Jeon and Yeonsil Kang point out that both the supporters and the critics of the Ch'ŏnggye Stream's restoration have one thing in common: "while the proponents of restoration and re-restoration debated the right proportion of nature, technology, and history to be used or displayed in the area, they usually glossed over the contemporary district as a *lived space of working people*" (756, emphasis added). Indeed, through the centuries of Seoul's urban existence, diverse people from the middle, working, and lower classes have made their homes and businesses near Ch'ŏnggye Stream. In the days before it was covered, Ch'ŏnggye Stream provided water for laundry and other needs, and it also functioned as a space for casual social gatherings and festivals. The region's

status as a place for the lower to lower-middle classes was solidified by its off-putting function as one of Seoul's open sewers; the severity of the stream's pollution reached a climax in the years after the Korean War as refugees and displaced people flocked there and built illegal shantytowns along Ch'ŏnggye Stream and industrial waste and dyes began to be dumped into the stream. Even when the stream was covered during the second half of the twentieth century, the region became a hotspot for South Korea's burgeoning industrialization through the establishment of tool and machine shops, secondhand and antique stores, and hundreds of street vendors. Some of the most memorable moments of the urban labor movement of the 1960s and 1970s occurred near Ch'ŏnggye Street, including the laborer Chŏn T'ae-il's self-immolation in 1970. While the stream's restoration displaced many of these markets and shops and gentrified the area, many tool and machine shops, secondhand bookstores, and antique markets remain along the stream's length and in the alleys today.

Pak T'ae-wŏn's portrait of the "lived experiences of working people" during the 1930s (as represented by the novel's cast of characters), though fictional, provides useful insight into an urban river landscape under conditions of colonial modernization (Jeon and Kang 756). Dynamics similar to those used in Japanese urban planning—which were implemented purposefully as an act of settler colonialism—are still used today with the effect of marginalizing different racial groups, economic classes, and industries in Seoul as well as in other parts of the world. We even see this in the Ch'ŏnggye Stream restoration project's forced displacement of the industrial manufacturers and shopkeepers who made their living near the covered Ch'ŏnggye Stream in the 1960s and 1970s; the restoration project involved a process of gentrification which both delegitimized and effectively destroyed their way of life (Jeon and Kang 756-758; Lim 192).

Historical Context

While the text offers insights relevant to contemporary conditions, my reading of *Scenes from Ch'onggye Stream* relies heavily on the novel's historical context.^[1] I offer here an overview of some relevant history regarding the colonial literary scene, urban spatial narratives, and Korean women. Literary scholar Christopher Hanscom argues that what unifies Korean modernist writers with each other as well as modernists from other parts of the world is “a common focus on language as a flawed medium of communication” (15). This crucial concern of form and style is also known as the “crisis of representation,” referring to a disillusionment with the capacity of the written word to accurately represent reality. ^[2] On top of this, Koreans were questioning and exploring transformations of a modernizing society under colonial rule, including what it means to be a woman with expanding opportunities and contested societal expectations, what it means to leave one's village to migrate to a rapidly growing city, what it means to work in a factory instead of taking up your father's occupation or being a housewife, what it means to be the first in one's family to attend school, what it means to choose one's spouse out of love, what it means to be a colonized subject of the Japanese Empire—the list could go on endlessly. It's no wonder Korean modernists felt a sense of crisis when trying to use language to make sense of this tempest of changes and transformations.

Under these conditions, literary modernism in Korea emerged as insular and linguistically experimental, and it has often been characterized as apolitical and purely aesthetic “art for art's sake” beginning with contemporary critics in the 1930s and persisting through the present day (Hanscom 9). The characterization of Korean modernism as apolitical, however, dismisses Korean authors' use of form to engage with the social and political issues of the time without necessarily espousing

leftist or nationalist ideologies. Recent scholarship indicates that Korean modernist texts are, in fact, socially and even politically engaged in their use of form and technique to respond to “colonial discourse, challenging authoritative attempts to present objective truth in a transparently communicative medium” (Hanscom 14, 18).

Enter Pak T'ae-wŏn, considered to be “one of Korea's leading modernist authors,” and who is known for his experimental techniques (Hanscom 39). In an interview, Pak's son, Daniel Pak, relates that his father “appreciated the cosmopolitanism of Japan [and] its openness towards Western ideas and literature, [but] he began to feel bitter about the Japanese colonization of his country” and he had a “determination to make his art an affirmative counterbalance to coercion and domination, in whatever forms it may take” (qtd. in Walsh 22-3, 44). Eventually, Pak took his Western-style and Japanese education and turned to his roots to write a novel about Ch'onggye Stream and the poor people living near it, and he relied heavily on his own childhood experiences living near the stream to craft his narrative (Walsh 31, 44). His novel, *Ch'ŏnbyŏn p'unggyŏng* (known in English as *Streamside Scenes* or *Scenes from Ch'onggye Stream*) was serialized in the literary magazine *Jo Gwang* (조광, *Morning Light*) starting in 1936, and compiled as a book in 1938 (Walsh 31; Poole 43).

Scenes from Ch'onggye Stream somewhat defies genre conventions and expectations of literary modernism, even departing from Pak's own style.^[3] Unlike Pak's other works, *Scenes from Ch'onggye Stream* does not center on a single protagonist, instead providing an “objective” and highly descriptive “panorama” of the urban quotidian in colonial Seoul (Hanscom 38). In his famous 1936 essay, literary critic Ch'oe Chaesŏ



Pak T'ae-wŏn (center, wearing glasses) pictured with fellow modernist writers Yi Sang (left), and Kim So-un (right).

compares Pak's style to the view of a camera:

[Pak] does not willfully manipulate the characters in accordance with some made-up story; rather, he moves or rotates his camera according to the way the characters move. Of course, this "camera" is a literary camera—it is the eye of the author. Pak was always careful not to have a speck of dust of subjectivity settle on the lens of that eye. The result, unusual in our literary world, appeared before us as a vivid and multifaceted representation of the city. (Ch'oe, qtd. in Hanscom 41).

While *Scenes from Ch'ŏnggye Stream* is certainly unconventional for modernist fiction and may seem to lack focus in its broad treatment of over fifty characters, the text does, in fact, focus on one central feature: Ch'ŏnggye Stream itself (Walsh 31). And, while the narrator in the novel is so unobtrusive and unknown that they almost entirely escape notice, there is still subjectivity in the gaze of the "authorial camera" that comes in the form of Pak's own familiarity with the neighborhoods around Ch'ŏnggye Stream as well as his human empathy for women in particular. In literature as well as in photography, it matters who is behind the camera.

Pak's "unfocused" mode actually facilitates reading the novel as a representation of the stream from a sympathetic observer rather than a fully objective one, crafting an image of streamside life that differed from Western and Japanese impressions and treatment of the stream and its denizens. During the colonial period, the Japanese government-general was heavily invested in modernization and transformations of urban space as part of the colonial project. Colonial control and transformation of urban space included "the symbolic deconstruction and reconstruction of Hanyang (Seoul)'s palace grounds" as well as "urban reforms" like "widening and straightening extant roads, expanding waterways for sewage, and refashioning domanian and religious spaces into civic parks and plazas" (Henry 28, 30). This

re-spatialization of Hanyang/Keijō/Seoul[4] was uneven, however, and the government general deprioritized public safety and sanitation issues in places where Japanese settlers were not interested in settling or that were considered strategically unimportant (Grunow 92). As such, the region near Ch'ŏnggye Stream, which during this period was "[an] overpopulated and unsanitary part of Keijō...inhabited primarily by indigent Koreans," was left relatively neglected (Henry 36). Plans to dredge the stream and improve the dangerous streamside roads were rarely or never implemented, despite the pleas of the residents (Jeon and Kang 741). While this neglect of regular maintenance led to more serious pollution of the stream that, despite its geomantic significance,[5] had functioned as an open sewer for hundreds of years, it also allowed the region to retain much of its spatial and cultural character, including "natural" neighborhood design and Chosŏn-era place names (Henry 23, 36-7).

Colonial and Western accounts of Seoul and Ch'ŏnggye Stream tended to paint the polluted stream and the lower-class people who lived near it rather negatively. In her 1898 book *Korea and Her Neighbours*, British traveler Isabella Bird Bishop relates her first impressions of Seoul during a late nineteenth-century trip. While she doesn't mention Ch'ŏnggye Stream by name here, it is highly likely that Ch'ŏnggye Stream and the women who do laundry there are the subject:

One of the "sights" of Seoul is the stream or drain or watercourse, a wide, walled, open conduit, along which a dark-colored festering stream slowly drags its malodorous length, among manure and refuse heaps which cover up most of what was once its shingly bed. There, tired of crowds masculine solely, one may be refreshed by the sight of women of the poorest class, some ladling into pails the compound which passes for water, and others washing clothes in the fetid pools which pass for a stream. All wear one costume, which is peculiar to the capital, a green silk coat—a man's coat with

the “neck” put over the head and clutched below the eyes, and long wide sleeves falling from the ears. It is as well that the Korean woman is concealed, for she is not a *hourì*. Washing is her manifest destiny so long as her lord wears white. She washes in this foul river, in the pond of the Mulberry Palace, in every wet ditch, and outside the walls in the few streams which exist. Clothes are partially unpicked, boiled with ley three times, rolled into hard bundles, and pounded with heavy sticks on stones. After being dried they are beaten with wooden sticks on cylinders, till they attain a polish resembling dull satin. The women are slaves to the laundry, and the only sound which breaks the stillness of a Seoul night is the regular beat of their laundry sticks. (Bird 45)

In fairness, we might read Bird as responding to the reality of what she finds in late Chosŏn-era Seoul through her own worldview and experience, which were informed by Victorian notions of hygiene, the imperialist activities of her home country of Great Britain, and her experiences in Japan. Regardless, her account is rather disparaging of both the stream and the culture she encounters. However, in the very beginning of his novel, Pak describes a scene similar to Bird’s account, but with a remarkably different focus and tone.

March cold could crack a giant earthenware pot, the saying goes, and the icy wind sweeping occasionally across the stream felt even more frigid for this time of the year. However, on the bank of the stream where women gathered to do their laundry, the warmth of the midday sun kept their hands from becoming numb in the water.

“Why on earth has the price of herring gone up so much lately?” asked Ippuni’s mother, a diminutive woman, observing her communal washing companions while shaking the rough cotton sheets in the water. Her

freckled face was small, and her eyes, nose, and lips were tiny too.

“Why? How much did you pay?” asked Kwidori’s mother. She was a housemaid at a traditional herbalist’s household and seemed to be about ten years younger than Ippuni’s mother—barely thirty. She was vigorously pounding a pair of purplish gray pants on a stone with a wooden laundry paddle. She had a habit of turning her head slightly to her left to hide the scar on her cheek, a result of *scrofula*.

“I had to pay thirteen *chŏn* for such a puny thing. First they asked fifteen *chŏn* for it. Imagine! I bargained for one *chŏn* less, but they wouldn’t hear of it,” she exclaimed incredulously, mouth opened and resting her hands from shaking her sheets as she glanced at the woman sitting next to her.

“For heaven’s sake, why did you have to pay so much? My mistress paid less than eight *chŏn* for each of them, I heard,” a pockmarked woman across from them, Ch’ilsŏng’s mother, chimed in, while pounding full force with her paddle on her wash.

Looking down from above the stream, tough-featured Chŏmryong’s mother roared like a man. “What a pity! Can’t you figure out the difference between buying one piece and buying a bundle? Look, if a piece of herring costs only eight *chŏn*, even people like us could live on without eating rotting *kimch’i* day in day out.” (1-3)[6]

While Pak certainly does not shy away from describing the stream’s pollution later in the novel, he doesn’t mention it in these first pages, focusing instead on the season, the chilly stream, and the individuals whose hands work in its waters. The scene is full of energy and vivid imagery, and he identifies individual laundry women by their features, habits, and names. This intimate portrayal from a sympathetic former member of that

community holds power in representing a living community of human and more-than-human constituents on their own terms.

The stories of women in particular play an important role in Pak's novel, specifically within the context of colonial modernization. The late nineteenth century and early twentieth saw the introduction of foreign ideas about social and gender equality, many of which challenged the Neo-Confucian order that had structured Korean society for centuries. In colonial Korea, women were still subordinate in a patriarchal system that was reinforced by the colonial education system and law, but industrialization and urbanization brought unprecedented numbers of women into the workforce and many in Korean society began to experiment with modern ideas (Molony, Theiss, and Choi 196). In this time characterized by the simultaneous retention of traditional duties and ideas as well as the expansion of opportunities for Korean women, the Korean New Woman, or *sin yōja*, used her education to pursue new ways of living and cultivate selfhood. Discourse on the "New Woman" was particularly sensationalized by more conservative (and mostly male) commentators who expressed anxieties about what they saw as society's declining morality and the disruption of family (Molony, Theiss, and Choi 243-245). The term "Modern Girl" gave this discourse a particularly negative nuance in the creation of a foreign-derived, sexualized, consumerist, frivolous caricature. Colonial-era discourse on the New Woman and the Modern Girl was "filled with exhilaration, new hope, and possibility, but at the same time, there was an

overwhelming sense of fear and anxiety" as both male and female intellectuals reckoned with traditional ways and ideas along with exploring new ideas and opportunities (Choi 11, 73).

In *Scenes from Ch'ōnggye Stream*, Pak presents what might be read as a mostly hopeful perspective on the trajectory for women in the modern world, though tempered with a healthy dose of reality regarding the persistence of oppressive practices. Pak's characters defy the Modern Girl caricatures that pervaded popular culture and discourse as the women in the novel navigate the opportunities that modern changes bring them as well as the traditional customs and ideologies that linger in their communities and families. The characters' actions also defy traditional perceptions of women, challenging ideas about value and its connection to appearance and utility as well as class and gender roles. The characters' actions in relation to their behaviors in and around Ch'ōnggye Stream represent a similar challenge to received perceptions of the stream as filthy, unremarkable, and perhaps better off buried under the ground, out of sight. Instead, Pak's Ch'ōnggye Stream is vibrant, active, and at times unpredictable; the stream creates a place where people gather to work, play, trade gossip, and celebrate. The impact of this combination of the traditional and the modern is characterized by Pak's ambiguity as he neither fully endorses nor entirely condemns traditional values or modern ideas. Instead, his depiction of (primarily lower-class) women suggests an empathy for their situation caught in transition between social ideologies and practices.

Women and Stream as Community Builders in *Scenes from Ch'ōnggye Stream*

One of the novel's most fascinating characters, Kimiko, acts both as a unique community builder and as a connection between women and water. Kimiko is a café waitress who works at P'yōnghwa, a streamside establishment which

Pak describes as "unpleasant and dingy" and "vulgar" (24-25).[7] From her first appearance and throughout the novel, Pak emphasizes Kimiko's "unpleasing" appearance, heavy drinking habits, older age, and brusque personality

as being, at first glance, at odds with the role she plays in P'yŏnghwa and in the community. However, through his descriptions of Kimiko and the stream near the beginning of the novel, Pak establishes beauty and, more broadly, value as being in the eye of the beholder.

Some might wonder why the bar [café] would employ her as a barmaid [café waitress], an ugly, old, and blunt-mannered woman.... The fact that she was the favorite among customers...was no small mystery, although, who knows, in modern times, such attributes might be deemed attractive. However, she had one merit that no one else could match, and that was her generous personality. She admitted to everyone that she had neither parents, nor siblings, no one on earth she could call family, and since childhood had endured a harsh life. Therefore, she understood suffering, and she recognized it in others and sympathized with them to the point of trying to help them in their worst hours of need. This quality gained her a reputation as a good person. (25-6)

Likewise, when the boy Ch'angsu first arrives from the countryside, he finds Ch'ŏnggye Stream beautiful because of what it represents for him—Seoul, a place of opportunity and excitement.

The sights, the sounds—everything left a deep impression on the boy. The streamside scenes were never considered very marvelous or beautiful, but to the mind of the boy who had come up from the countryside for the first time, the place *was* beautiful and it *was* marvelous, for the sole reason that it was Seoul. (47, emphasis added)[8]

In these two descriptions, beauty is in what a person or a place means to people personally, not in their appearance alone. Ch'angsu finds Ch'ŏnggye Stream beautiful despite its pollution, and, despite her so-called ugliness, customers at P'yŏnghwa still seek out Kimiko for her

compassion and listening ear. As Pak's narrator muses in his description of Kimiko, perhaps the very qualities that people find attractive (in both women and streams) are changing in the colonial modern context. Kelly Walsh writes that Pak's novel "reflect[s] the contradictions of a traditional Confucian society and the desire for greater social liberation accompanying the process of rapid modernization" (27). Is a modernizing Korea a place where women who defy tradition like Kimiko, or where a polluted yet life-giving stream like the Ch'ŏnggye might actually be desirable, sought-after, or valued?

The development of Kimiko's character reflects a continued meditation on this question, and the way Kimiko builds a sense of family and community with other female characters indicates that increased social liberation is indeed part of Pak's vision for positive cultural change and community building that might come with modernity. Kimiko proposes to Kŭmsun, a young widow from the countryside who has recently come to Seoul, and Hanako, one of the other waitresses at P'yŏnghwa, that the three of them find a place to live together. Kimiko and Hanako would provide the financial support for their lives and Kŭmsun would care for household chores and meals. After Hanako and Kŭmsun eagerly agree to Kimiko's plan, the narration relates the following about Kimiko:

Since losing her parents, a young, homely, and poverty-stricken Kimiko had known no love, and to this day had never been the object of another person's affection or kindness. Her path had been lonely, and she would have continued to amble along it with her head bowed down to the end of her life. But now, she no longer needed to suffer life's misfortune alone, because she was gaining friends who would share everything with her, trusting and supporting one another with warm feelings and deep regard. *So the joy of living would surge in their hearts like a gushing spring.* As if she had been reunited with her long-lost family

and embraced by their affection, Kimiko's eyes sparkled, and she blossomed into a smile. (165, emphasis added)

Through Kimiko and her relationship with these two other women, Pak establishes the groundwork for his main counterexample to the novel's numerous unhappy and abusive traditional marriages—the joy and beauty of found family and platonic love. It is not coincidence that Pak compares the joy that Kimiko anticipates (and realizes) in her life with Hanako and Kumsun to a “gushing spring.” In linguistically linking the “joy of living” through Kimiko's scheme to a “gushing spring,” Pak not only connects the movement of water to joy, but he also draws a direct connection between Kimiko herself and Ch'onggye Stream. This highlights Kimiko and Ch'onggye Stream's respective roles in creating community, specifically enriching communities that provide places to gather to enjoy the camaraderie of fellow sufferers.

It is in this connection between Kimiko and Ch'onggye Stream through moving water—a gushing spring of joy—that an ecofeminist reading of the novel becomes particularly productive. Pak complicates the dualistic narrative of colonial modernity, which pits the traditional and the modern against each other, in painting a picture in which both traditional Korean culture (and

especially Confucian values) and modern changes are neither strictly vilified nor uniformly praised. Whereas most of the women in the story have only two (respectable) options for their lives—marriage or becoming a *kisaeng*[9]—Kimiko forgoes both and forges her own path, creating a community for herself and others that ends up being more fulfilling and loving than any marriage in the novel—indeed, probably bringing them more happiness than traditional society would have held for them anyway. She defies the modern caricatures of both the New Woman and the Modern Girl as well as the scorned occupation of café waitress, roles which mass culture made into scapegoats for all the ills of modernity as “destroyers of the Korean family” (Ro 733, 740). Destroying family being the last thing she desires, Kimiko builds her own unconventional family with the other lonely and downtrodden women she encounters. Using the liberties made available in modern society, Kimiko and her found family members create a life that, unlike many traditional families of the period, is full of love and security. In writing a character like Kimiko, Pak tacitly offers an alternative narrative to contemporary social discourse: that the changes and freedoms that come with urban colonial modernity might actually have the capacity to strengthen the institutions and values that premodern tradition holds dear.

The Agency of Ch'onggye Stream

To further understand the role of Ch'onggye Stream in the novel's community, we turn our attention to chapter 23, “A Landscape in the Rainy Season.” This chapter comes at the approximate midpoint of the novel, and it focuses closely on the weather and the stream as the subjects of the action in the chapter instead of as the backdrop for character-driven storylines. Centering Ch'onggye Stream in this scene and in the novel reinforces the importance of the stream in the narrative and roots the novel in place: in

an urban environment full of contradictions and ambiguous environmental interactions.

In this chapter, despite the inconveniences and damage that the rising stream has caused for the community, Ch'onggye Stream acts as the center of joyful community gathering even in its swollen and dangerous state. When morning breaks, “many spectators...[line] both sides of the stream, unmindful of the rain,” as a curious turn of events take place (176). The water level has now “reached up to the drainage pipes on the wall” of

the streambed, and myriad objects like “pieces of lumber, planks, straw hats, [and] things like that” are swept down the rapid and swollen current (176). Young men, bring long bamboo poles to the streamside and run up and down its length through the muddy streets, using the poles to attempt to retrieve various items swept up in the stream’s flow. Pak calls these young men “champions” whom the spectators cheer on in what has become “a sports arena for the entertainment of the people” (176).

It is in this chapter that Ch’onggye Stream feels the most alive, where its autonomy feels the most palpable. Using an ecofeminist perspective to read the stream as “an active subject, not a passive object” uncovers intriguing insights (Merchant 185). As a character, the stream is every bit as nuanced and complex as Pak’s human characters. The stream does not play a merely passive role in the community, does not simply receive pollution and provide water for laundry. The stream moves quickly, it rises, it carries objects from more affluent areas up stream. It is unpredictable and its behaviors do not always impact all community members the same way. Reading the stream as a character enables a fluid comparison with the female human characters of the novel, emphasizing the similar ways in which women and stream are underestimated and mistreated, yet vibrant and vital members of the streamside community.

Conclusion

Like the amalgamation of objects caught up in the swollen flow of Ch’onggye Stream, *Scenes from Ch’onggye Stream* emerges as, at first glance, a fluid and disorderly mess, a whirlpool of moments, scenes, and characters with no strong narrative to guide the reader to meaning. Indeed, *Scenes from Ch’onggye Stream* does not carry a didactic message that urges the reader towards any particular political, ideological, or moral ideal, as Pak’s contemporary

Through Ch’onggye Stream’s carrying of objects in particular, an interesting insight comes forward in reading the stream as a character instead of a backdrop. In reading Ch’onggye Stream as an agent, we might read this indiscriminate gathering of items and moving them downstream to the salvaging “champions” as a type of wealth or material redistribution, an equalizing of sorts in which anything and everything belonging to anyone, rich or poor, upstream or downstream, can be swept up in the stream’s current (Shin 106-9). As a force of nature, Ch’onggye Stream is ostensibly no respecter of persons, hence the carrying of objects of all kinds in its flow. However, if we read Ch’onggye Stream as a *member* of the lower-class community portrayed in the novel, then perhaps the stream *acts* in response to the issues of colonial modernity that the characters as well as the author deal with in the book. Just as characters like Kimiko sift through the options presented at the intersection of traditional life and colonial modernity and apply them based on circumstances and needs, perhaps the stream, too, literally gathers and redistributes *physical items* and re-presents them to its community for recycling and reinvention in a new context. Pak thus uses both Ch’onggye Stream and the novel’s women to navigate a modernizing world through salvaging ideals, practices, and ways of life, which is echoed in the structure of the novel itself.

critics observed. When considered within a twenty-first-century ecocritical framework too, the novel does not advocate for ecological conservation or preservation like many environmental novels do today; these are not among Pak’s goals with this novel. Despite this, one would be remiss to assume that *Scenes from Ch’onggye Stream* is politically and socially disengaged. While Pak doesn’t suggest policy or envision an ecotopian future, he most certainly interrogates



Remaining pillars from the old Sam-il Elevated Motorway in the restored Ch'onggye Stream. A cormorant is visible perching on the top of one of the pillars. Image courtesy of the author.

relationships among humans and between humans and Ch'ŏnggye Stream as he experiments with the opportunities, possibilities, and contingencies that impact those relationships, guided by a sense of empathy. It is this mode of relationship-focused environmental literature that makes *Scenes from Ch'ŏnggye Stream* an especially rich subject for feminist ecocritical study.

These kinds of stories and readings are helpful—even crucial—for addressing our own contemporary crises. 1930s Korean literary modernists were facing a crisis of representation and a struggle to imagine the future in the onslaught of colonial modernity; do we not also now struggle to imagine a future without apocalypse, a future with hope and meaning? Colonial modernity transformed Korea's landscapes, turned their society and culture upside down, and even cost many their lives. Our local and global twenty-first-century sociopolitical and environmental crises seem, in many ways, to differ more in scale than in kind.

The urban environmental questions and issues at play in the Ch'ŏnggye Stream's history are not unique to Seoul or to Korea; we find these questions at myriads of urban waterways across the world as our cities continue to evolve and adapt to this changing world and the changing ideas of the people in it. Many urban planners look to Ch'ŏnggye Stream's restoration as a successful example of how to do urban stream "daylighting." While the "success" of the project is debatable, environmentalists across the world would do well to pay attention to more than just

the restored stream's ecological integrity and look at the relationships between people and stream throughout history, including literary representations like *Scenes from Ch'ŏnggye Stream*. The human-stream relationship in the novel is certainly no utopian ideal, but the way the characters embody the changes of the time in their relationships with the stream and with each other is telling. Perhaps one of the messages a novel like Pak's gives us today is that urban waterways play critical roles in human communities and ways of life, and as such remind us to center relationality in our attempts to restore such waterways.

While the work of mitigating climate and ecological disaster remains crucial, the work of renegotiating our relationships with the natural world, with each other, and with the systems that we've grown accustomed to is also vital to moving towards a future that we would actually want to be a part of. A full return to the past or an indiscriminate embrace of the new will both surely fall short of creating a world of environmental well-being, social equity, and meaningful relationality. The task falls to us, in the midst of whirlwind changes and existential uncertainty, to create a future that, if not perfect, might still create space for joy, meaning, and the ability to thrive. When trying to make sense of a world full of bewildering changes and bleak outlooks, we, like Pak, might do well to start with the places and the people at the heart of what matters to us, with the relationships that, despite the chaos and destruction that rain down upon us, keep us afloat.

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Footnotes

[1] Because my Korean language skills are still developing as of this writing, I primarily use Ok Young Kim Chang's 2011 English translation of *Scenes from Ch'önggye Stream* in this piece. Where I have analyzed specific passages, I have read the original Korean and, in some cases, used my own translations to highlight Pak's word choice or tone. Additionally, while I cite many Korean scholars writing in English, my engagement with Korean-language scholarship is limited. I mention these limitations to highlight the importance of studying non-Western works; language barriers are a part of the reason for Anglo-American environmental scholarship's neglect of non-English-language texts. While ideally ecocritics will study foreign languages to expand the breadth and depth of their research (as I am currently doing and planning to continue), it seems unrealistic to expect that many currently active scholars will begin mid-career to learn new languages to advanced levels in a time frame that will be helpful for addressing contemporary environmental crises.

I hope to present this article as an example of how meaningful ecocriticism might be done—and perhaps even needs to be done—aided by texts in translation and performed by scholars without the requisite advanced foreign language skills. For my own prospective scholarly career, I continue to work diligently to acquire the language skills necessary to ultimately engage Korean texts entirely in their original language.

[2] Hanscom characterizes the crisis of representation that challenged Korean modernists in particular as informed by four different contexts, some of which are specific to time and place and others of which are not: colonization, the "broader constructivist worldview of modernism," the introduction of modernity, and the debates of the local literary community in East Asia (16). In this self-questioning literary scene, we find a group of writers who were born either just before or around the formal beginning of Japanese colonization (1910), and as such were raised and educated entirely within the colonial system. This group found themselves "caught between the state, global economy, and precolonial memory, and [they lived] the contradictions between nation and capital in a peculiarly fraught fashion" (Poole 11). In 1933, a group of modernist writers with some influence in Seoul literary circles formed a society called the Kuinhoe (구인회, "Group of Nine") (Hanscom 9). While membership changed over the society's three-year existence, among its ranks were the author of the seminal short story "Wings" (*Nalgae*, 날개) Yi Sang, modernist poet Chöng Chiyong, poet and literary critic Kim Kirim, short story master Yi T'aejun, and Pak T'ae-wön.

While the ideologies and literary modes of each of members of the Kuinhoe differed significantly, Pak's work as well as that of other members of the Kuinhoe was considered "part of the rise of what was perceived as socially 'disengaged' literature" as colonial censorship began to silence "socially 'engaged' realist literature," which in the colonial context referred specifically to leftist and proletarian

literature and writers who favored didacticism in their writing to advance socialist ideologies and Korean independence (Hanscom 2; Pihl 69). This understood dichotomy between modernists (socially disengaged, not realist) and leftist writers (socially engaged, realist) characterized the “contentious relationship between modernism and realism” that pervaded literary discourse during the period (Hanscom 8).

Several of contemporary Korean critics expressed opinions about the nature of the representational crisis that marked this “apolitical” modernist literature of the period. Literary critic Im Hwa lamented that the gap between the “ideal” and the “real” forced writers to either represent a character’s introspective inner world or describe the social context and environment but not both; the crisis of representation prevented modernist authors from “[unifying] these elements into what Im judged a coherent work of art” (Hanscom 26). Kim Kirim saw a connection between modernism and the urban subject, reflecting on how “modernists are the ‘children of modern civilization,’ born and raised in the city, taking up urban themes and subject matter,” in part because “sentimental portrayals of nature” could no longer captivate modern readers (Hanscom 28). We see this manifest in modernist style and word choice that animates the bustling energy and clamor of modern cities, including the sounds of “trains, airplanes, factories, and crowds” (28). Prominent literary critic Ch’oe Chaesŏ argued in a 1935 article that “for a true literary crisis to emerge... there must be a complete breakdown in the belief system that formerly held society together” (paraphrased in Hanscom 29). Ch’oe saw such a breakdown in 1930s Korea, a period of transition where traditional ideas were being left behind, but “a belief system befitting the new era [had] yet to emerge” (Hanscom 29). All of these observations from contemporary critics were explanations for the diffused meaning and lack of overt sociopolitical engagement in the literature of the period.

For further reading on literary modernism in colonial Korea, see Christopher Hanscom’s *The Real Modern* and Janet Poole’s *When the Future Disappears*.

[3] Pak T’ae-wŏn is “typically characterized as an experimental modernist, interested in the play of language and possibilities of style, and presenting the reader with anemic protagonists wandering the streets of the city and lost in self-contemplation” (Hanscom 10). Such a wandering protagonist is present in Pak’s more widely-read 1934 novel *A Day in the Life of Kubo the Novelist* (소설가 구보씨의 일일), which bears other aspects common to literary modernism like the “inward turn” and a stream-of-consciousness style. Pak often achieves this style in his trademark long sentences, once writing a seven-page short story in a single sentence and earning the nickname “our long-distance athlete Kubo” from contemporary Yi T’aejun (Poole 137-8). While *Scenes from Ch’ŏnggye Stream* does include some lengthy sentences, it is a notable departure from Pak’s typical style.

[4] The city known today as Seoul (literally meaning “capital”) has had multiple names over the centuries. During the Chosŏn Dynasty (1392–1910) it was known as Hanyang, Hansŏng, and/or Seoul. The Japanese name for the city during the colonial period (1910–1945) was Keijō (Kyōngsŏng in Korean). Since liberation and the establishment of the Republic of Korea, the city is known officially as Seoul.

[5] Old Seoul (originally known as Hanyang) was built according to principles of geomantic theory Fungsu or Pungsu-Jiri (the Korean adaptation of the Chinese Feng Shui). The valley is considered a propitious location because it is “encircled by four inner mountains” and Ch’ŏnggye Stream, which finds its headwaters in those mountains, runs eastward through the center of the old city (today’s downtown), and empties into the Han River, which flows in the opposite direction towards the sea.

The prominent depiction of the Ch'ŏnggye Stream in Chosŏn-era maps along with the city's surrounding mountains reflects the importance of the stream in the urban environment of Seoul from its very outset (Cho 149).

[6] From Ok Young Kim Chang's English translation of *Scenes from Ch'ŏnggye Stream* (2011); page numbers refer to the text in translation. All further quotes from the novel are also from the text in translation unless otherwise indicated.

[7] Even though Kimiko is ethnically Korean, she takes on a Japanese name for her occupation as a café waitress. Chang's translation refers to P'yŏnghwa as a bar, but it is called a "café" (카페) in Pak's original work, a low-class establishment of Japanese import. The female employees of these cafés were called waitresses, or *yŏgŭp* (여급) who served drinks and other refreshments and were expected to flirt with their male customers (Ro 732). They were not *kisaeng* or *geisha*, neither were they (legally) prostitutes, but they were a sort of sex worker in that they "commercialized [their] erotic womanliness" to perform the fantasies of their male customers (Ro 732). Many café waitresses adopted Western or Japanese names to "[stand] for the erotic fantasy which she presents to others: that is, she was an ethnic Korean woman, but pretended to behave like a non-Korean" (Ro 735).

[8] Translation by author; page numbers refer to Korean text.

[9] *Kisaeng* were female entertainers who catered to upper-class men (*yangban*) and historically were well-educated in musical and literary arts despite their low social position. They were not prostitutes, but they would flirt with the men they entertained and occasionally perform sexual favors.

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