



## Korean Literature and Culture

Jan 22, 2020 (Wednesday) 6-8pm, Wilhelmstraße 133, Room 30

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Realizing Melodrama: Colonialism and Secular Love in Korean Proletarian Novels

### Abstract:

Melodrama form has frequently been devalued by critics worldwide for its catering to the public interest at the expense of literary quality. Accordingly, Korean studies scholars have understood colonial Korean novels through the frameworks of modernism and realism exclusively. However, most novels written in Korean at the time were published in newspapers and magazines also serialising melodrama narratives. To resolve this conundrum, this paper will examine the material in the colonial Korean publishing market. For example, many novelists selected the form of melodrama for serialising their writings in newspapers and magazines so as to meet readers' growing demand for melodramatic literature. This paper treats one masterpiece of colonial Korean proletarian literature, *The Human Predicament* [Inganmunche] by Kang Kyöng Ae, as a key textual example by which to understand how melodrama was cultivated within a realist narrative appearing ostensibly to bear little relation to melodrama. Stories of love and sexual harassment, which are not otherwise consistent with the novel's political message, are significant events in *The Human Predicament*. On the one hand, these stories interfere with the narrative's delivery of a revolutionary message, but on the other hand, they help readers to understand the complex social problems treated in the novel through a very accessible and entertaining narrative. This paper will therefore suggest that the form of melodrama in this novel specifically and by extension colonial Korean proletarian literature in general functioned as a strategy by which to effectively disseminate revolutionary messages to a wider reading public.

**Sangmi Bae** completed her doctorate in modern Korean literature at Korea University, South Korea. She is a specialist in the field of working-class fiction in colonial Korea and contemporary South Korea. She published her monograph, *Revolutionary Women: Gender, Labor, and Sexuality in Colonial Korean Proletarian Literature* in November 2019. Her research interests include radical working-class narratives, melodramatic form, sex work, representations of sexuality and race, and the feminist movement in South Korea.