

Colonial Parallels: The Abbey Theatre and the Formation of Modern Korean Drama

The genre of modern drama was established in Korea primarily during Japan's occupation of Korea (1910–1945). In 1931, a group of writers who had studied foreign literatures at Japanese universities, along with two dramatists practicing locally, founded the Theatre Arts Research Association with the aim of establishing a Korean modern dramatic tradition. TARA staged plays that differed from preexisting performances of the time (commercial spectacles, adaptations of popular novels, and translations of foreign plays) in that its members set out to write and stage original works reflecting concerns about their contemporary colonial society. While their literary training was largely in European traditions, the TARA dramatists' engagement with foreign drama was not an attempt to mimic European, or "Western," literature. Among the traditions they studied, Irish drama held a singular importance. Playwrights such as Yu Ch'i-jin recognized in the Abbey Theatre and the Irish Literary Revival the cultural project of a fellow colonized nation that had used literature and theatre to reclaim national identity under colonial rule – aspirations that resonated deeply with their own.

By the 1930s, Korean newspapers such as the *Dong-A Daily* regularly featured articles on the Abbey Theatre, the Irish Revival, and key Irish writers including W. B. Yeats, Lady Gregory, J. M. Synge, and Sean O'Casey. Yu Ch'i-jin, TARA's most prominent playwright, openly modeled his *Nongchon* (rural area) trilogy on O'Casey's Dublin trilogy and published a series of newspaper articles in 1935 detailing the Irish playwright's influence on his own work. He adopted O'Casey's strategies (the domestic setting, the focus on working-class families caught in the crossfire of political upheaval, the refusal to prescribe ideology) and transposed them to the Korean countryside, staging the everyday devastation of tenant farmers under Japanese colonial policies. Yet Yu and his contemporaries were not simply depicting Korean poverty. Through their work, they were drawing a conscious parallel between the Irish and Korean colonial experiences: the struggle against a neighboring imperial power, internal divisions over collaboration and resistance, and the aspiration to forge a national literary tradition that could claim a place within the broader context of world literature.

The Abbey Theatre's impact on the formation of modern Korean drama demonstrates how colonial writers actively built literary connections that crossed not only national but also imperial boundaries. The TARA dramatists' turn to Irish drama was a self-imposed, lateral engagement between two colonial peripheries belonging to different empires: a relationship that cannot be adequately explained by frameworks that read colonial

literary influence as flowing vertically from center to periphery. By comparing Yu's *Landscape of the Village with the Willow Tree* and O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock*, I plan to demonstrate how Yu adapted O'Casey's dramatic methods to represent the realities of tenant farming life in colonial Korea. A close reading of the two will reveal that Yu's engagement with Irish drama was neither imitation nor adaptation in a simple sense, but a deliberate effort to position Korean national drama within a broader network of colonial literatures.