

## “We Should Learn to Live, Learning is Power”: *Pyöllara*, Night Schools and the Dilemma of Workers’ Education in Colonial Korea

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### Introduction

The night school (*yahak*) movement has been closely related to development of formal schooling in Korea. The history of the night school can be traced back to the 1890s, but they were most active immediately after the Protectorate Treaty of 1905, when demand for the political restoration of national sovereignty was high. The movement peaked again in the 1920s and 1930s, when the number of night schools increased to serve both political and educational purposes after the March First Movement in 1919.<sup>1</sup> Typically classified as *sasölgangsüphoe*

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All the translations of Korean sources are the author’s. Based on East Asian ordering of names, the Korean individuals are indicated with their surnames first, followed by their given names.
- 1 Kim Hyöngmok, “Yahagundongüi üüüwa yön'gudonghyang,” *Sahak yön'gu* 66 (2002): 167-198; Kim Hyöngmok, “Samilundong chik'u yahagundongüi chön'gaeyang-sanggwa yöksajög sönggyök,” *Yöksawa tamnon* 86 (2018): 65-101; The night school movement under Japanese colonial rule was noted as a significant legacy by Korean progressive teachers in the 1980s. Kim Yönghun, Kim Dökhüi, Song Wönjae, “Ilcheha minjungyahak,” *Kyoyuk'yönjang: Kyosawa haksängüi ch'am-*

or private classes for social education, the nature of the night schools varied, ranging from those established or supported by the Japanese to those with defiant roles due to their revolutionary goals.<sup>2</sup> Up until 1945, when formal schooling was limited and the so-called *ip'angnan* or difficulties of access to schooling were prevalent, the night schools often complemented the role of public schools, providing educational opportunities for school-aged children.

A good example of how the night schools played a pedagogical role supplementing public schooling can be seen in the socialist magazine *Pyöllara*, which was published between 1926 and 1935.<sup>3</sup> During the Japanese colonial period, it was the children's magazines, which were published by various social groups including nationalists, socialists and others, that played an important role in socialization beyond schooling.<sup>4</sup> *Pyöllara* is noteworthy because it was intimately connected with the network of night schools that were attended by working-class youth.<sup>5</sup> This study examines the pedagogical roles of the articles in *Pyöllara* regarding the print media movement for youth in Korea and discusses its implications for the history of education, beyond the literary cultural movement.<sup>6</sup> *Pyöllara* aimed at raising political awareness for

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*salmül ch'ajasö*, 1 (1985): 237-273.

- 2 Night school was a form of private education used extensively by various groups, and was distinguished from more institutionalized private learning institutes such as *sasölhaksulgangsupso*. Chöng Hyechöng, “Ilcheha haksulgangsupsoüi munhwaundonggwa saemgorhagwön,” *Yöksawa kyoyuk* 29 (2019): 39-85.
- 3 Wön Chongch'an, “1920nyönda Pyöllara wisang,” *Han'gug adongmunhak yön'gu* 23 (2012): 65-104; Ryu Tökche, “*Pyöllarawa* kyegüpchuüi adongmunhagüi üimi,” *Kugögyoyuk yön'gu* 46 (2010): 305-334.
- 4 In the 1920s and 1930s, various magazines that emerged had a social educational function in Korea. Dafna Zur, *Figuring Korean Futures: Children's Literature in Modern Korea* (Stanford: Stanford University, 2014), 29-31.
- 5 Son Jüngsang, “KAPFüi yesultaejunghwaron mosaek kwa shilch'ön.” *Kugöggungmunhak* 194 (2021): 225-260.
- 6 This article is particularly interested in the educational aspects embedded in the agendas of the “cultural,” or “literary left.” For the description of the colonial

marginalized working youth, but it also had pedagogical roles, as its readership comprised the school-age population who could not afford to attend school.

Even in night schools run or supported by socialist groups, the educational content and curriculum often remained rudimentary, despite their ultimate pursuit of political education. This gap often situated workers' education in a dilemma between basic education and political education. Despite this, it is worth exploring the medium through which these movements celebrated the experience of young workers, specifically in the form of narratives in the magazine, and examining the potential of the movements' commitment to "child empowerment."<sup>7</sup> This paper examines the ideals of the socialist activists in Korea as well as young workers' aspirations, including how they articulated new visions and inspired imaginations to create an image of a new independent child under colonial circumstances.

### **Pyöllara and its Educational Function**

The print media movement peaked in colonial Korea in the late 1920s and the early 1930s, after the March First Movement in 1919, which was in line with the international progressivism of the time, notably the Wilsonian notion of self-declaration and the socialist revolution in Russia. The movement deserves attention because of its socializing function under colonial conditions. It is of note that the print media for youth readers also shared a similar purpose with the global New Education movement. New education (in Europe) or progressive

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leftist culture, see Sunyoung Park, *The Proletarian Wave: Literature and Leftist Culture in Colonial Korea, 1910-1945* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015).

7 John Wall, *Children's Rights: Today's Global Challenge* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017); John Wall, *Ethics in Light of Childhood* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2010).

education focusing on child-centered philosophy and pedagogy (in the US) became a trend in the early 20th century as a movement opposed to the traditional conception of education.<sup>8</sup> East Asia was not an exception to this global movement. In Japan, for example, new ideas on education and the “child” were introduced in the early 20th century by noted reformers. While the national educational policy remained intact due to the strong centralized state-driven system, these new ideas were embodied in various private institutions during the Taishō Democracy.<sup>9</sup>

The concept of understanding child empowerment thus became part of a “global” trend of progressive education that was socio-culturally “translated”<sup>10</sup> and re-constructed in the East Asian context. In colonial Korea, however, it would not be an exaggeration to say that progressive education was absent in formal schooling. Instruction in schools was dominated by political indoctrination and strict discipline, serving the needs of assimilation.<sup>11</sup> It was therefore necessary for progressive education to be introduced and practiced through other forms, such as in the print media movement. The child empowerment movement in Korea was appropriated from larger waves of the progressivism of the

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8 Hermann Röhrs & Volker Lenhart, eds., *Progressive Education Across the Continents: A Handbook* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1995).

9 Yoko Yamasaki & Hiroyuki Kuno, *Educational Progressivism, Cultural Encounters and Reform in Japan* (New York: Routledge, 2017); Jeremy Rappleye, “Re-contextualizing foreign influence in Japan’s educational history: the (re)reception of John Dewey,” in R. Bruno-Jofre & J. Schriewer (eds), *The Global Reception of John Dewey’s Thought, Multiple Refractions through Time and Space* (New York: Routledge, 2012); Takashi Kangi & Yuriko Kinoshita, “The education reform in Japan as influenced by the progressive educational movement,” in *Progressive Education Across the Continents*, ed. Hermann Röhrs & Volker Lenhart.

10 Gita Steiner-Khamsi, “Cross-national policy borrowing: Understanding reception and translation,” *Asia Pacific Journal of Education* 34, no.2 (2013): 153–167.

11 E. P. Tsurumi, “Colonial education in Korea and Taiwan,” in *The Japanese Colonial Empire, 1895-1945*, ed. Ramon H. Myers, Mark R. Peattie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987).

time to serve the actual lives of children. It was also part of larger nationalist cultural and enlightenment movements, some supported by *Ch'ōndokyo* and others by leftist political groups, including socialists. Representative magazines, notably *Ōrini* (1923-1935) and *Haksaeng* (1929-1930), were published by the *Ch'ōndokyo* activists, and *Pyōllara* (1926-1935) and *Shinsonyōn* (1923-1934) were published by socialists.<sup>12</sup> Like other liberal or progressive movements, these practices were suppressed in the 1930s, and most discontinued publication by the mid-1930s.<sup>13</sup>

Through these movements, activists developed their own conceptualization of childhood while challenging the politicized and colonized “fascist” notions of childhood, such as the “*shō kokumin*” (small citizen/people, 少國民) developed by the Japanese. The idea of the child as portrayed by the liberals and progressives focused on children’s dignity and rights — considering humanity’s natural rights — and on their natural goodness.<sup>14</sup>

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12 In the 1920s and 30s, the word for children or youth in Korean was *ōrini*, meaning young person. *Ōrini* referred to a person under 20 and was further distinguished into *yunyōn* (early and middle childhood) and *sonyōn* (boy, adolescence) from around the age of 13-14. *Adong* or *ōrini* referred to those who are under 20 years old, where ages 8-14 were called *yunyōn adong*, and 14-18 were *sonyōn adong* or *ch'ōngnyōn*. Chōng Chinhōn, “1930 nyōndae sonyōnshi palgulgwa munhaksachōg ūimi koch'al,” *Tonghwawa pōnyōk* 39 (2020): 171-195.

13 While most influential magazines were forced to cease publication due to political pressure in the 1930s, a Christian magazine called *Aisaenghwal* (Children’s Life) was maintained until 1944, thanks to its pro-Japanese transition. Pak Yōngchi, “Ōrinijapchi aisaenghwarūi ch'angganjudoseryōk yōn'gu - Aisaenghwal palgane ch'amyoohan mikuk kidokkyo sōn'gyosa chiptanūl chungshimūro,” *Adong ch'yōngsonyōn munhak yōn'gu* 24 (2019): 203-237; Pak Yōngchi, “Taep'yōngyang chōnjaengi aisaenghwal ch'inil pyōnhwa kwajōnge kwanhan yōn'gu - Kidokkyogyodan'gwa aisaenghwal p'yōnjipchinūi chōnhyangūl chungshimūro,” *Adong ch'ōngsonyōn munhak yōn'gu* 26 (2020): 239-284.

14 Zur, *Figuring Korean Futures*, 47-74; Ryu, “*Pyōllarawa* kyegūpchuūi adongmunhagūi ūimi,” 320-321.

From the very beginning of its publication in 1926, *Pyöllara* declared that it would become a magazine for working children, while the authors of creative writings, columns, and essays in the magazine varied. *Pyöllara* was published in Seoul by Ahn Chunsik, a writer of children’s literature, who ran a printing company. Major contributors who served as editors included participants in the Korea Artista Proleta Federacio (hereafter, KAPF), a leading socialist writers’ association (1925-1935), such as Pak Seyöng, Song Yöng, and Lim Hwa.<sup>15</sup>

In the late 1920s and early 1930s, the demand for youth labor increased in response to the Great Depression. In particular, the 1930s saw an influx of Japanese capital and large-scale industries in Korea. The growth of the machinery manufacturing industry was also related to the promotion of military industrialization. The surge in the number of factories increased the employment of unskilled child labor and female workers. Towards the late 1930s, the Japanese Government-General of Korea applied the Entry Restriction Decree for young people, making it impossible for men aged 12–30 and women aged 12–20 to be employed without government permission. This measure was not for the purpose of labor protection but for the efficient mobilization of the youth labor force to the industry designated by the Japanese Government-General of Korea: the military industry. Due to the decline of the rural economy in the 1930s, the rural youth labor force was mobilized for factory labor, converted to cheap urban labor, or moved to workplaces in Japan.<sup>16</sup>

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15 Pak T’aeil, “Suwönjijyök örinimunhakkwa Ahn Chunsik üi samkwa munhak,” *Hankuk munhak nonch’ong* 81 (2019): 91-147; Sö Kyöngsök, “Han’guksahoejuüimunhagüi tach’üngsöng,” *Uri mal küi* 52 (2011): 335-353.

16 Kwak Könhong, “1931-1945nyön kongjang yunyön nodongjaüi hyöngsönggwa sönggyök,” *Yöksawa hyönshil* 20 (1996): 229-255; The number of factories and workers increased in the 1920s, from 2,087 factories and 55,279 factory workers in 1920 to 5,342 factories and 99,547 workers in 1928. Kim Hyöngmok, “Samilundong chik’u yahagundongüi chön’gaeyangsanggwa yöksajög sönggyök,” 71.

Socialist organizations began to emerge in the early 1920s, and in 1925, the Communist Party in Korea was formed.<sup>17</sup> The development of the socialist youth movement was related to the formation of an organization called the *Chosŏnsonyŏnyŏnhap'oe* in 1927. It was a merger of the *Chosŏnsonyŏmundonghyŏp'oe*, a left-wing organization formed in 1923, and the socialist organization *Owŏrhoe*, which was formed in 1925. With the development of the socialist movement in Korea, the spread of “scientific knowledge” for the working class was prioritized in the agendas of these organizations.<sup>18</sup> The print media movement was part of a trend to edify and organize the youth around enlightening media, night schools, libraries, and various social activities.

According to the activist Ōm Hŭngsŏp, the publication of *Pyŏllara* went through three stages. The first was from 1926 to 1929, referred to by Ōm as the “enlightenment” period, although the magazine had yet to establish its own identity during this time. The second stage was a period of “deliberate” action from 1929 to 1932. The last stage was the period of “struggle” from 1932 to 1935. It is clear from this periodization that the political atmosphere was unfavorable in the 1930s<sup>19</sup> and that *Pyŏllara* suffered from irregularities throughout its publication.<sup>20</sup>

From its inception, the magazine was published for young people of the proletariat; however, reflecting the incipient stage of the socialist movement that had just emerged in Korea, the content of *Pyŏllara* in the 1920s, contrary to its original intention, did not differ considerably from that of liberal magazines. It was only after the 1930s that the magazine began to introduce Marxist concepts and examples of general life in Soviet Russia in more earnest forms.<sup>21</sup> In an article written in

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17 Robert Scalapino & Chong-Sik Lee, *Communism in Korea* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972).

18 Ryu, “Pyŏllarawa,” 314-319.

19 Ōm, “Pyŏllaraui kŏrŏon kil,” *Pyŏllara* 1 (Post-independence issue, 1945): 8-9.

20 Min, “Kippŭn il! t'ongk'wahan soshig! tongmudŭra, sŏpsŏp'aemalla,” *Pyŏllara* 57 (March 1932): 55-56.

1931, Ahn Chunsik wrote that his interest was initially in “poor youth” but gradually materialized into “organized” laborers and peasants.<sup>22</sup> While the distinction between poor youth and organized young workers was not particularly clear, there was no doubt that *Pyöllara* set itself apart as a magazine for working youth. The following article demonstrates this purpose:

Haven't you heard the name “Marx” often? So, who is “Marx”? “Marx” is like a light in your heart, like the bright Sun ... on a cloudy day ... Your father, brother and teachers did not teach you this! They still haven't taught you who “Marx” is... “Marx” discovered, most scientifically, how much a worker is paid per day for working in a factory and how much the capitalist takes away [from the worker].<sup>23</sup>

Opportunities for formal schooling were limited for working youth in Korea during the 1920s and 1930s, and *Pyöllara* therefore had multiple functions. It was largely a medium where anyone could submit and circulate their own writings, but it also provided instructional materials that could be used for workers’ night schools and served as a site for activists to exchange their worldviews and strategies.<sup>24</sup> Compared to the earlier issues in the 1920s, which focused on introductory materials on Western civilization or Korean folklore, more space was provided in the 1930s for creative writing that dealt with the situation of the urban working class or peasants. In the journal, the editors also sought to introduce what they called “essential knowledge,” such as science, history, or Marxism, as well as literature, to raise the so-

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21 Ryu, “Pyöllarawa,” 313-319.

22 Ahn Chunsik, “Tan han kot, tan han kaji,” *Pyöllara* 51 (June 1931): 2-3.

23 Pak Yönghui, “Maksü[Marx]nün Nuguin-ga?,” *Pyöllara* 45 (October 1930): 4-6.

24 Chöng Sönhüi, “Han'guk adongmunhak hyöngsönggiüi chömgöng, pyöllara mokch'a chöngni,” *Kündae söji* 22 (2020): 461-519.

cio-political consciousness of the working youth.<sup>25</sup> The knowledge provided by the magazine had “eye-opening” effects for readers, “who had not known what science is or what the world is like.”<sup>26</sup>

### Emergent Socialist Ideals for Young Workers

Although the socio-educational function of youth magazines was a general trend at the time, *Pyöllara* reinforced its own distinctive line focusing on the working youth. One incident that set this magazine apart from the nationalist magazines was its attitude toward “Children’s Day.” Articles in *Pyöllara* criticized Children’s Day as being nothing more than a day full of meaningless placards and flags on the streets. They argued that it had nothing to do with factory and farm workers and called for another day for these workers to celebrate for themselves: May Day. In a poem in *Pyöllara* entitled “Children’s Day is just an advertisement day,” the author praises May Day as a day for workers to fly their own “xx flags.” What “xx” means in this context is not clear, but its ideological orientation effectively alludes to the author’s commitment to those working in factories and farms.<sup>27</sup> In another article, the author writes that Children’s Day was celebrated nowhere in the world but in Korea and argues that the rest of the world had another “universal” holiday celebrated by working-class people called “May Day.”<sup>28</sup>

As the labor and socialist movements became active after the 1930s, *Pyöllara* strengthened its character as a magazine that supported factory and farm workers. The magazine’s interests were more explicitly

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25 Chöng Chinhön, “1930nyöndaek kwahakkyoyanggwä Pyöllara,” *Tonghwäwä pönyök* 41 (2021): 327-359.

26 Ch’oe Chöngsik, “Pyöllara ilko!,” *Pyöllara* 51 (June 1931): 45-47.

27 Chöng Ch’öngsan, “Örininarün kwanggonariraji,” *Pyöllara* 50 (May 1931): 13.

28 Hong Sunyöl, “Örininariran muöshin’ga,” *Pyöllara* 50 (May 1931): 14.

defined than before, and its direction aligned with notions of class conflict and socialism. Ahn Chunsik, the publisher, noted in the early 1930s that the target of the magazine should be young laborers and peasants who were “organized,” not simply “poor” boys or girls in the factories or farms.<sup>29</sup> However, this distinction is hardly evident in most articles. An emphasis on organized labor seems to have been present in the minds of the editors, but in most cases, being “poor” and “working” were perceived as synonymous. This reflected the reality of the time, as working youth typically spent their time in the workplace rather than in school because they were poor. The writings also tended to describe landlords or factory owners indirectly as “*ttungbo*” or a “fat person” to symbolize the rich dominant class. This might have been the case because, as in most literary works during the time, metaphorical expressions were preferred to socio-scientific terms. There was a tendency to use such terms as “*ttungbo*” to depict a person who forced others to work while idly hanging around without much activity. The poor were portrayed as hard-working people who were underpaid or often starved, while the wealthy were illustrated as fat and evil. In one poem, the author blames the hot summer sun for afflicting outdoor workers while allowing the rich to rest in their comfortable homes. The word “fat” is used synonymously with the word “rich” in this poem:

You, relentless August Sun,  
 Hot sun, like a fire,  
 What grudge do you have,  
 to burn the skinny backs of poor us, who work outside?  
 I don't know what's inside your cowardly heart.  
 You never disturb those fat people who live in Western-style  
 houses,  
 but keep hurting us over and over, only because we look weak  
 and skinny!<sup>30</sup>

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29 Ahn, “Tan han kot,” 3.

Because the magazine readership was diverse, with many readers being working-class youths without any schooling, it was also important to promote basic literacy skills. For example, in a poem entitled “*Kanada norae*,” (a Korean alphabet song), the author introduces 13 consonants of the Korean alphabet with corresponding words and sentences intentionally chosen to raise political awareness. Among the words used in the song are propagated images of oppression or resistance, such as *kanan* (poverty), *rapal* (trumpet), *pasuöbörinda* (breaking down), *k'al* (knife), and *p'aöp* (strike).<sup>31</sup>

In its editorial line, *Pyöllara* was clear about what readers should prefer and what they should be wary of. Although the term socialism was not explicitly used in *Pyöllara*, the magazine’s approval of it was made clear by how it introduced Soviet Russia’s development. Figures such as Karl Marx and Rosa Luxembourg were often mentioned as heroes, and various social and educational developments following the Russian Revolution were highlighted. Many articles discussing the improved living conditions in Soviet Russia indicate that the editors of *Pyöllara* considered the situation there to be ideal. The optimal direction for *Pyöllara* was socialist, as evidenced by these Russian examples.<sup>32</sup>

*Pyöllara* approached social and political issues from the perspectives of social class, that is, poor vs rich or working people vs employers. Ethnic or national issues were relatively under-represented in the magazine as it typically focused on the general problem of labor and treated the problem of class as more fundamental than others. For example, in a debate between two readers, Lee Kowöl and Kim Wölbong, the younger reader, Lee, urged contributors to children’s literature to avoid overindulging in otiose expressions, such as “glorifying the colors of

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30 Song Hyekwang, “Ssawöboryönda, 8wöl t’aeayangül hyanghayö purünün norae,” *Pyöllara* 60 (July 1932): 40-41.

31 Lee Hyangpa, “Kanada norae,” *Pyöllara* 50 (May 1931): 9.

32 For instance, Kwön Hwan, “Pyönjüngböbiran muöshin’ga,” *Pyöllara* 57 (March 1932): 4-5.

the flowers and the brightness of the moon” and to instead focus on the “real life” of Korean working youth. Lee wrote that they should be aware that “we are born in poor Chosŏn,” where the necessities of everyday life, including food and clothing, were not as abundant as in “richer countries such as England and America.”<sup>33</sup> Lee claimed that these “reactionary” non-political sentiments should be removed from the magazine as they were only suitable for “American and European children.” Kim Wŏlbong strongly opposed this statement, arguing that it would not make sense to compare children from Europe and the United States to Korean children. Kim argued that children in Europe and America were not all rich and that Lee had overlooked the universality of class contradictions when describing the poverty of Korean children.<sup>34</sup>

Are you trying to ignore the fact that in the United States... there is an astonishing number of six million who are unemployed since the Great Depression, or do you not even know?<sup>35</sup>

While the authors of *Pyŏllara* were keen on discussing social inequality, gender issues were not noticeably recognized as an independent concern and were instead often subsumed under class issues.<sup>36</sup> While liberal and socialist feminisms had been present in Korea in magazines focusing on “New Women” since the 1920s,<sup>37</sup> there were few articles

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33 Lee Kowŏl, “Pandongjŏg chakp'umŭl ch'ŏngsanhaja!,” *Pyŏllara* 50 (May 1931): 45.

34 Kim Wŏlbong, “I kowŏl kunege,” *Pyŏllara* 52 (July/August 1931): 23.

35 Kim Wŏlbong, “I kowŏl kunege,” 23.

36 Lee Tongkyu, “Yŏgong,” *Pyŏllara* 50 (May 1931): 32.

37 Hyaewŏl Choi, *New Women in Colonial Korea: A Sourcebook* (London: Routledge, 2012); Lee Keunhwa, “Sahoejuŭi undonggwa yŏsŏng haebangŭi munje — Hyŏndaebuŭn(1928), Yŏsŏngjiu(1929), Yŏin(1932)ŭl chungshimŭro,” *Uriŏmunyŏn'gu* 70 (2021): 93-116.

arguing for gender equality in *Pyöllara*. Few dealt with gender-specific issues, and most articles contained messages centering on class relations. In some writings, “immature girls” and hard-working boys were uncritically contrasted:

The sound of the spring flute of the immature girls,  
While several of them gather and disperse ...  
the woodcutter boys carry their nets, struggling to climb up to  
the mountain.<sup>38</sup>

*Pyöllara*'s emphasis on class conflict shows the magazine's commitment to socialism, although the implications were implicit due to censorship. The authors' critical attitude toward Christianity also endorsed this position. Among the various magazines in Korea published around this time, quite a few were liberal, nationalist, or Christian. The writers of *Pyöllara* considered some of these magazines to be “reactionary,” notably a magazine called *Ai saenghwal* or *Children's Life*.<sup>39</sup> In *Pyöllara*, there was a tendency to see Christianity as an antithesis of the ideal worldview. The magazine published articles that criticized religion as being akin to drugs or opium and that condemned the church for making people conformists who were content with reality. Some writings contrasted the night schools run by progressives with the Sunday school of the Christian Church. They also compared materialism with the theism of Christianity and criticized the complacency function of religion.<sup>40</sup> This critical attitude toward religion shows that the socialists aimed to develop readers into politically awakened activists. They sought to play a role in stimulating and cultivating consciousness so they could recognize the problems of social

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38 Editor, “Tokpon lkwa: pomdongsanesö,” *Pyöllara* 57 (March 1932): 2-3.

39 Pak Yöngchi, “Örini chapchi aisaenghwarüi.”

40 Song Yöng, “Yunyön chuirhakkyonün öttöhan koshin'ga?,” *Pyöllara* 56 (January 1932): 29-31.

reality and fight for fundamental change.<sup>41</sup> In a situation where the school-age population was not guaranteed basic schooling, *Pyöllara* had no choice but to provide political education — thereby ensuring that readers could awaken as workers — along with demands for the basic and general education necessary for working youth.

### **The Night Schools: The Ideal and Reality of Workers’ Education**

The year 1932 marked an important turning point in the history of *Pyöllara* until it was eventually discontinued in 1935 because of the colonial suppression of the leftist movement. 1932 was a critical year, as the KAPF activists were planning to organize youth workers and peasants through various cultural activities, with *Pyöllara* playing a pivotal role.<sup>42</sup> The so-called “*Pyöllara saggön*,” a police investigation centering on the links with the Japanese leftist movement which occurred in the same year, made it clear that *Pyöllara* was important to the left-wing cultural movement.<sup>43</sup> The incident was triggered by the Night School Association Fair hosted by *Pyöllara* from July 2nd to 3rd, 1932.<sup>44</sup> It was planned as an event for the 6th anniversary of *Pyöllara*, designed in line with the change of direction in KAPF’s activities in 1930, which promoted the popularization of socialism using strategies that employed various genres of popular media (literature,

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41 Song, “Yunyön chuirhakkyonün öttöhan koshin’ga?” 31.

42 Son, “KAPFüi yesultaejunghwaron mosaekkwa shilch’ön,” 236-240; Chöng, Chinhön, “1930 nyöndae sonyönshi palgulgwa munhaksachög üimi koch’al,” *Tonghwawa pönyök* 39 (2020): 171-195.

43 Ch’oe Pyönggu, “1920nyöndae sahoejuüüi taejunghwa chölllyakkwa chosönmunje,” *Pan’gyoömun yön’gu* 37 (2014): 201-229.

44 Ahn Chunsik, “Yönhap’agyehoerül mach’igo yöröbunkke kamsahan malssümül türim,” *Pyöllara* 60 (July 1932): 6-7; Pak Seyöng, “Chönsön yahak kangsüpso sarip’akkyo yönhap taehagyehoe ch’onggwän,” *Pyöllara* 60 (July 1932): 26-37.

film, music, theatre, etc.).<sup>45</sup>

The schools that participated in the event at that time were diverse. For the Fair, children's works were submitted and exhibited by more than 60 private institutes, and plays were presented by members of 15 schools. Some participated as a group, while others attended as individuals. This gathering, which was the largest of its kind, was considered a meaningful pedagogical opportunity for private institutes, particularly night schools, to jointly plan and share with each other.<sup>46</sup>

From its inception, *Pyöllara* attempted to provide the knowledge necessary for working youth. In the 1930s, the magazine was more active in creating a forum for communication, encouraging youth to submit their own writings. Night schools subsequently became an important mediating venue for these activities. When the *Pyöllara* staff was preparing for the Fair in July 1932, reporters visited some schools to report on the actual situations therein.<sup>47</sup> The editors also collected and published works on night school students. Three night schools in particular are worth noting here to better understand their educational work.

*Samp'ansuyöng Hagwön* was located in a predominantly working-class area at the foot of *Namsan* Mountain near the South Gate (*Namdaemun*) of Seoul. The school was the only educational institution in the area that provided basic education. Residents were

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45 The *Pyöllara* editorial staff were brought under police investigation when it was discovered that they had contact with socialist writers in Japan. After the convention (or Fair), the editorial board member Pak Seyöng reported the details of the event to the Japanese *Shinkö kyōikukenyūsho* (新興教育研究所 or Research Institute for Newly Emerging Education). The police investigation centered on Japanese activists sponsoring working youth in Korea through *Pyöllara*. Pak Seyöng, Chöng Ch'öngsan, and Shin Kosong from *Pyöllara* were arrested, and the censorship of *Pyöllara* was further reinforced. Son, "KAPFüi yesultae-junghwaron mosaek kwa shilch'ön."

46 Pak, "Chönsön yahak kangsüpso sarip'akkyo yönhap," 26-37.

47 Pak, "Chönsön yahak kangsüpso sarip'akkyo yönhap," 27-28.

workers in rubber factories or lacquer factories or were A-frame (*chige*) coolies. The 64-year-old principal, Kim Tonggyu, who established the school in 1928, intended to dedicate himself to neighborhood children who could not afford to study. There was no tuition fee for the school and only a small operating cost was received for electricity and coal. The school had 230 students, all of whom were workers' children, divided into three grades. All students were factory workers between the ages of 12 and 19, and most were female. There were six teachers and volunteers at the school. In addition to instruction on basic subjects, the school offered extra-curricular activities such as student council meetings, speeches, and children's plays. The principal saw these extra-curricular activities as “more effective than regular instruction.”<sup>48</sup>

*Yukyŏng Hagwŏn* was housed in a tin-roofed building in a village with 200 families at the foot of the hill in *Dapsimni*, east of Seoul. The person interviewed by the reporter was a male teacher named Sŏ Roksŏng, who was around 30 years old. Because the school only had classrooms and no office, the teacher suggested that the interview be held at his house. In the school, there were approximately 70 students between the ages of 7 and 20. Almost all the students came to study after work, with little time to sleep. There was no tuition fee, and one teacher taught all students from the 1st to 4th grade. Mr. Sŏ worked as a teacher in a regular school during the day but came in the evening to run the night school. The reporter also met the principal, a man named Kim Chonggu, who was a “courteous and generous gentleman.” Mr. Kim criticized a nearby church for attempting to stop students from coming to the school. The church was also criticized for not teaching any knowledge studies and instead only attempting to preach the gospel like an opiate and make the children obedient. After visiting the school, the reporter wrote, “The opening of the eyes of hundreds of children and the dissemination of considerable knowledge

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48 Editor, “Yahak kangsŭpso pangmun'gi: Samp'ansuyŏng Hagwŏn,” *Pyŏllara* 56 (January 1932): 18-22.

make them aware of how much our poor boys and girls need today's night school."<sup>49</sup>

*Ch'angŭi Hakkyo* was a school in a mountainous village near *Samgaksan* in Seoul with about 600 households, most of which farmed fruit trees or were employed in paper businesses. It was said to be difficult to make a living in the paper industry, even when working 20 hours a day. The school began as a village youth group project and operated for 10 years. The teachers dedicated themselves to the education of poor children and there were approximately 100 students in total. The school did not ask for tuition, but because it was difficult to operate it accepted a small amount (50 *chŏn* per capita) for operating expenses. The reporter met a male teacher named Sŏng Chun, who had been working at the school for eight years. The school had a playground and a teachers' office, where several teachers were working at the time. The school had revived, against all odds, when the principal, Kim Kyochun, took office a few years prior to the reporter's visit. The school emphasized exercise because the teachers believed that health was the most important thing for poor students. To nurture students' minds to help them live cooperatively in a group, the school held extracurricular activities in the forest as well as plays with children's songs and fairy tales to cultivate emotions. Because most of the students helped in the household industry, there were many absences when the village was busy with work.<sup>50</sup>

Since these night schools operated in the evening, they were essentially schools for people who worked during the day. Most of the night schools were coeducational, but some were specifically girls' schools.<sup>51</sup>

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49 Editor, "Yahak kangsŭpso pangmun'gi: Yukyŏng Hagwŏn," *Pyŏllara* 57 (March 1932): 51-54.

50 Editor, "Yahak kangsŭpso pangmun'gi: Ch'angŭi Hakkyo," *Pyŏllara* 58 (April 1932): 44-47.

51 Among the 46 schools that made school-level submissions for the Fair, 6 schools were girls' schools. Pak Seyŏng, "Chŏnsŏn yahak kangsŭpso sarip'akkyo yŏnhap," 28-29.

The founders of the night schools were dedicated contributors to the education of poor children; however, finances for running night schools were extremely limited, as they typically did not have any external support. Schools often collected a minimum tuition fee from students to secure maintenance costs, such as paying electricity bills. The schools were operated by renting large rooms in shabby buildings, and even basic stationery for classroom instruction was lacking. The average annual budget per night school in 1921 was about 90 won, which was less than the monthly salary of a principal at a regular school. The conditions of the night schools later worsened, and this amount even decreased to 39 won in 1930, which was less than what the “rich paid once for a drink at the time.”<sup>52</sup>

Night schools were central to the leftist activists’ purpose, as the schools were for working-class children and youth who needed to be enlightened about the nature of their work in the capitalist society. However, given the intention of the *Pyöllara* editors, there was a gap between the socialist ideal pursued by the activists and the longing of ordinary learners for basic education. The activists were keen to mobilize and organize workers and peasants for political action, but the activities of night schools hardly extended beyond the provision of basic literacy.

### **The Dilemma: Political Awareness versus More Schooling**

Whereas most magazines addressed children and adolescents in regular schools, *Pyöllara* substantially supported the network of night schools for children who were in the workplace and therefore unable to attend school. The magazine was explicitly targeted at working youth and attempted to provide them with necessary information and

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52 Editor, “Chakku churöganün yahak kangsüpsö t’onggye,” *Pyöllara* 60 (July 1932): 24.

knowledge. In the 1920s, such attempts were limited to introducing miscellaneous common-sense knowledge; however, in the 1930s, the socialist orientation to raise political awareness was more enthusiastically pursued and the magazine focused on scientific knowledge and messages related to class conflicts.<sup>53</sup> The publisher, Ahn Chunsik, noted in the 5th anniversary issue that the magazine should focus more on the needs of organized groups of factory workers and peasants.<sup>54</sup> However, even in the writings of the 1930s, the overall content was devoted less to organizational strategies and more to anecdotal approaches to expose the miserable conditions of the working youth, the suffering of uneducated people, and inequalities between the rich and poor. Although it is not easy to appraise how successful this magazine and the night schools were in mobilizing the working youth in regard to class struggles, they did promote an essential awareness of human dignity and a sense of solidarity against class oppression. In *Pyöllara*, many articles were written by young readers who attended night school and wrote about their own views on education. One student wrote the following:

We go to rural night school. Every night we sit around a dim lamp and learn to write. We learn Korean, Japanese, and arithmetic...All from our night schools are farmers... We used to be little ignorant villagers... We had been scorned and beaten by people who had learned letters and had some money...Our grandfathers and fathers, who had lived wrong, put us in an ugly shell. But now we know how to write... and read newspapers the teachers bring to class. We know what we should do as poor peasants. Many of our

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53 This reinforced political censorship. For example, all of the award-winning works in the contest held by *Pyöllara* in 1932 were not published due to censorship. Min, "Kippün il!" 55-56.

54 Ahn Chunsik, "Tan han kot, tan han kaji," 2-3.

comrades get together, love each other and now live as one. Give us a fight, we don't hesitate... We have worked to death and starved without warm clothes. Why? We need to know why. We should learn to live. Learning is power...We, rural night students, our poor comrades.<sup>55</sup>

Students graduated night school after studying for -6 years. Because the night schools were not accredited institutions, it was difficult for the students to advance to higher levels, and most eventually went back to work, including the household industry. In a report conducted by *Pyöllara* in 1932, out of 378,000 unaccredited private institute students, the number of graduates was 49,440, of which 6,155 aspired to advance to upper-level schools, 13,608 were employed, and 39,677 were engaged in domestic labor or household workforce (家事).<sup>56</sup>

During the graduation season, the writings of students who were leaving school were published in *Pyöllara*. The students wrote what they had learned at night schools and what they regretted. The students expressed that they were fortunate to have met colleagues in the same situation, who simultaneously worked and studied under difficult conditions. The students showed their gratitude to the teachers who worked for them and promised to practice what they had learned in life. Having such an opportunity to learn was enormously precious, but most students still expressed feeling helpless and hopeless upon graduation. Most graduates had to go back to sweat labor and had no hope of continuing their studies. Among the graduates of ordinary private schools, poor students who had difficulty getting into higher education expressed their ambition to continue their studies at night

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55 Lee Yönggün, “Nongch'on yahak,” *Pyöllara* 57 (March 1932): 42.

56 Editor, “Choröpsaengün ödiro,” *Pyöllara* 67 (April/May 1933): 13-14; According to the statistics surveyed by the editorial staff, the number of students from 30-50 at the time of admission decreased to about 20 upon graduation. Editor, “Chakku churöganün yahak,” 24.

schools with advanced programs:

I entered this school in the spring of the year that I turned 10. Although our school was a private school, the desks and chairs were all as good as public schools ... “We must learn to live. Our world was ignorant, but your world must be enlightened. And you all must become reliable persons.” Every time I hear the principal’s instructions as such ... I get more passionate about studying. I thought I should continue with my studies, but I am very upset that my intentions did not come true ... but I am not disappointed. I plan to continue studying, even at a night school. As the principal said, I am determined to become a reliable person who can save us from this poor situation.<sup>57</sup>

What they were left with, in reality, was only a vague longing for more learning and regret for not being able to learn more. However, in the minds of the students, a stronger sense of human dignity and social awareness were created through learning.

What position could adults and editors take toward students who lacked basic education but wanted more? *Pyöllara* also published the opinions of adults with comments on students’ graduation. Some commended the students’ efforts and encouraged them to continue learning.<sup>58</sup> Others stated that going to a higher-level school to earn an academic degree should not be a goal in life. They also persuaded students to learn to value themselves, even if they were not in higher-level schools. Given the reality of the students’ situation, the authors attempted to say that a desire for further education would be futile and only fuel the meaningless “exam hell.”<sup>59</sup> Students also sought to value

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57 Kim Yuman, “Choröbül hamyönsö,” *Pyöllara* 67 (April/May 1933): 17-19.

58 Kim Ch'aesöng, “Choröpkwa yaksok,” *Pyöllara* 76 (April 1934): 26-27.

59 Öm Hüngsöp, “Ip'akshihöm iyagi,” *Pyöllara* 65 (February 1933): 36-39.

what they learned at night schools, while they would eventually need to return to the difficulties of life with immediate poverty and physical labor. Educated or “enlightened” workers were meant to be far more “powerful” than ignorant workers, although it was not clear how they should use this newfound power.

### Conclusion

With the upsurge of the socialist movement from the mid-1920s and Korea’s participation in the international communist movement,<sup>60</sup> socialist activists in the country concentrated on political education for young workers. The nature of political education propagated by these activists focused on a “transformative approach” that emphasized class consciousness.<sup>61</sup> With a large number of youth laborers and limited provision of elementary schooling in colonial Korea, political education for workers could not be separated from the transmission of basic literacy and core knowledge. While regular schools operated by the Japanese Empire were geared toward producing compliant subjects, the night schools affiliated with political groups aimed to empower the working children and youth.

*Pyöllara* was active in sponsoring instructional activities in the night school network committed to workers’ education. The magazine became a site for activists running the night schools and young workers to express themselves in writings and exchange pedagogical materials. However, the activists had to cope with the ambiguity of their transformative approach to raising workers’ consciousness, as they simulta-

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60 Sophie Quinn-Judge, “Ideological influences on the revolutionary high tide: the Comintern, class war and peasants,” *South East Asia Research* 19, no.4 (2011): 685-710.

61 Linda Cooper, “Workers’ education and political consciousness: a case study from South Africa,” *The Economic and Labour Relations Review* 17, no.2 (2007): 194.

neously promoted basic and political literacy. The activists and young working people agreed that they should become the subject of social change and that they needed scientific knowledge to be devoted actors, yet young workers also wanted more education, which often meant public schooling.

The key issue was how to combine the needs and demands of general education and political education. For socialist activists, forming political consciousness in the minds of the working youth was a necessity for further empowerment, whereas for young workers, additional education was a necessity to grow as a cultured person, and political consciousness was only considered one part of this. This was not much different from the dilemma of providing general education versus political education that has appeared in the history of international worker education.<sup>62</sup>

Despite this dilemma, the print media movement was still meaningful for young workers of the time, as it played clear pedagogical roles. The magazines provided opportunities that were difficult to find anywhere else for the vulnerable classes and helped them to recognize in themselves the power to survive and fight ideological domination and socio-political inequality. Although receiving more education meant having access to a more humane life for young workers, they were also aware that using more public schooling as a ladder to social mobility did not guarantee this. Basic education and political education were by no means dichotomized in the minds of the night school students, as witnessed in their writings: “We learn Korean, Japanese, and arithmetic... We know what we should do as poor peasants... Many of our comrades get together, love each other and now live as one... We should learn to live. Learning is power.”<sup>63</sup>

While there was an inevitable gap between the goals of basic educa-

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62 Brian Simon, *The Two Nations & the Educational Structure 1780-1870* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1974), 354-367.

63 Lee Yōnggūn, “Nongch'on yahak,” 42.

tion and political education, these statements show how students integrated this gap: by combining what it meant to achieve basic literacy with transformative political consciousness. This awareness in the young readers resonates with the tenets of “progressive education”<sup>64</sup> aimed at empowering children to develop a consciousness of social responsibility and grow as masters of their own lives as well as in society, which could hardly be practiced in colonial schools at the time. This also suggests that the implication of education in the colonial context can be rearticulated to be more inclusive of the empowering effect of various institutions beyond the provision of formal schooling.

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64 Röhrs & Lenhart, eds., *Progressive education across the continents*.

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〈Abstract〉

**“We Should Learn to Live, Learning is Power”:  
*Pyöllara*, Night Schools and the Dilemma of  
Workers’ Education in Colonial Korea**

*Yoonmi Lee*

This study examines the pedagogical roles of the print media movement for youth associated with night schools in colonial Korea, focusing on the socialist magazine *Pyöllara* (1926–1935). The movement deserves attention because of its educational function, in which activists endeavored to empower young workers. Since formal schooling was limited under colonial conditions, the night schools often complemented the role of public schools, providing opportunities for school-aged children. However, even in schools supported by socialist groups, the educational content and curriculum often remained rudimentary despite their ultimate pursuit of political education. This gap often situated workers’ education in a dilemma between basic literacy and raising political awareness. Despite this dilemma, the magazine and night schools nonetheless provided young workers with exceptional opportunities to empower themselves, which could hardly be done in public schools at the time.

**Keywords:** *Pyöllara*, night schools, workers’ education, print media movement for youth, child empowerment, socialist magazine

〈국문초록〉

## “배워야 산다, 배우는 게 힘이다”: 일제강점기 ‘별나라,’ 야학, 그리고 노동자교육의 딜레마

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이 연구는 노동자·농민 야학과와의 긴밀한 연계하에 발간된 사회주의 소년잡지 ‘별나라’(1926-1935)를 중심으로 매체기반 야학운동이 지닌 교육적 역할에 대해 조명한다. 별나라 편집진은 노동자·농민 야학을 지원하는 교육자료를 정기적으로 수록하고, 야학에 다니는 노동자, 농민 청소년들의 기고문을 게재함으로써 당시 야학의 현황을 드러내고 있다. 식민지 시기 입학난으로 학령기 청소년에게 부족한 교육기회를 보완적으로 제공했던 야학의 기능은 계급의식에 기반한 정치교육을 목적으로 했던 사회주의적 노동자·농민 야학에서도 예외가 아니었다. ‘별나라’에는 노동자 교육의 쟁점인 기본교육과 정치교육이라는 두 가지 과제 사이의 딜레마가 드러나고 있으며, 이는 당시 사회주의 활동가들의 목표와 미취학 노동자·농민 청소년의 요구 사이에 인식의 간극이 있음을 보여주는 것이다. 그러나 이를 노동자 교육의 한계로만 보기는 어렵다. 노동자·농민 야학을 통해 형성된 문해력을 기초로 자신의 언어로 세상을 읽고 표현하는 주체 형성의 효과가 나타나고 있는 점은 적어도 식민지 학교교육에서 기대하기 어려운 의미 있는 교육 결과였음을 주목할 수 있다.

주제어: 별나라, 야학, 노동교육, 소년매체운동, 아동주체형성, 사회주의매체