

provincial folks who, unlike him, are “real people” and know how to grow a good persimmon.

North Korean fiction also rarely depicts its characters while visiting a theatre or a museum or reading fiction – i.e. occupied with the very “proper cultural entertainment” which the visiting Korean writers once admired in Soviet life. The only common sign of a cultural life which I have been able to discover in North Korean literature is “the sound of an accordion” pouring out of the open windows of a new house.²⁴⁴

Indeed, Communist ideology has always stressed that workers and peasants constitute the social base of society while intellectuals are merely a thin “layer” which is supposed to serve the interests of the two major classes. In North Korean propaganda this postulate was expressed much more strongly than in the USSR, which is somewhat surprising given the Confucian background of Korea and its culturally preconditioned respect for intellectuals combined with an ingrained contempt for physical labour. It appears likely that this under-representation of the intellectuals in North Korean literature was related to the “deep mistrust of intellectuals” by the North Korean elite which Brian Myers mentioned when writing about Kim Il Sung’s policy.²⁴⁵ Unlike the Soviet Stalinist policymakers, many of whom originally came from the intelligentsia and maintained strong connections with this social stratum despite all the “proletarian” rhetoric, the nascent North Korean elite (and especially the eventually triumphant “Guerrilla faction”) included people of rather low educational levels who distrusted urban elites quite sincerely regardless of any ideological considerations. This vision could not help but influence the patterns of North Korea propaganda and the wider worldview presented in North Korean literature.

The USSR is the center/hope of the world

In the official Stalinist propaganda of “the world” this world consisted of two clearly defined parts: the “progressive camp” which was led, transformed and inspired by the Soviets, and the “reactionary camp” which viciously opposed the “only true course” of Communism. The Soviet Union was depicted as a protector of the oppressed and a model to be emulated. From the 1920s, a special emphasis was placed on the anti-imperialist essence of Soviet policy and the generous aid provided by the Communist authorities to the “less developed” ethnic groups inside the USSR.²⁴⁶

These stereotypes were especially meaningful to the newly liberated Koreans, and the Soviet propagandists paid particular attention to this aspect. A large number of works by minority writers were translated into Korean in the 1940s, while the propaganda machinery produced an avalanche of Korean-language booklets eulogizing

²⁴⁴ See, for example, Pyŏn Hŭi-gŭn, “Haengbokhan saramdŭl” [Happy People], *Munhak yesul*, 1953, #6, 75.

²⁴⁵ Brian Myers, *Han Sŏr-ya and North Korean Literature*, 38.

²⁴⁶ For the most recent and profound study of the early Soviet nationalities policy, see: Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001.

the Soviet policy in non-Russian republics. The travelogues followed the same line. Yi T'ae-jun could not find enough words to express his admiration for the “wise and noble ethnic policy” of the USSR.²⁴⁷ Yi Ki-yŏng eulogized the USSR where “all the ethnic groups live as one big happy family”.²⁴⁸ Min Pyŏng-gyun exclaims enthusiastically, repeating the popular Soviet stereotype: “The USSR is a land of many nations. But you do not feel as if there are too many peoples here. Everybody is happy. Everybody is singing only songs of happiness”.²⁴⁹

The propagandistic stereotype of “freedom of minority cultures” in the USSR naturally demanded the idea of previous shackles, the image of the successfully repelled “Other”. Yun Tu-hŏn, who visited Tajikistan, an alleged “Soviet paradise risen from the desert”, wrote with great regret about pre-Soviet Tajikistan which was allegedly “suppressed by Arabs” for centuries. Although the Tajiks had had their own native alphabet since the 8th century AD, they were forced to use Arabic letters until liberated from this by the Communist revolution.²⁵⁰ The author delicately omitted the critical details as to which alphabet the Tajiks used at the time of writing – which was the Russian Cyrillic alphabet, of course.

Min Pyŏng-gyun wrote about Tajikistan as previously poor and “suppressed by the Muslims” (sic), but affluent and exuberant now. The faces of liberated Tajik girls shine with content; they play musical instruments and the people gather around, now free from the Muslim tenets, merrily drink red wine – a commodity which is really quite rare in this area where strong distilled liquors have always been much more popular, etc.²⁵¹

However, to make the propaganda more effective, the image of a subjugated enemy is not sufficient enough: an active threatening force is necessary. In the Soviet propaganda this role was bestowed on “imperialist America”. As we have seen already, in the North Korean travelogues most allegations about the technological or educational achievements of the USSR had strong anti-American, anti-Western implications. When writing about the “rich cultural life” of the Soviet collective farms Yi Ki-yŏng compared it with the situation in capitalist countries where “even workers in cities live under the strong oppression of illiteracy, not to mention the peasantry”.²⁵² When Yi visited the Research Institute for Labour Protection in Leningrad, among the other inventions of this institute he mentioned a Soviet factory machine which was made in order to replace a pre-existing American contraption. The guides noted that the American device was too noisy and uncomfortable for the workers.²⁵³ The obvious implication was that unlike Soviet state industrial managers, American capitalists do

²⁴⁷ Yi T'ae-jun, *Ssoryŏn kihaeng*, 102, 104, 113-116, 133-136, 191.

²⁴⁸ Yi Ki-yŏng, *Kongsanjuŭi t'aeyang-ŭn pit'nanda*, 12.

²⁴⁹ Min Pyŏng-gyun, “Myŏngnanhan saram” [Merry People], in *K'ŭnak'ŭn uŭi*, 32-35.

²⁵⁰ *K'ŭnak'ŭn uŭi*, 107-124.

²⁵¹ *K'ŭnak'ŭn uŭi*, 32-35, 36-39.

²⁵² Yi Ki-yŏng, *Kongsanjuŭi t'aeyang-ŭn pit'nanda*, 103.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*, 123.

not care for their workers. Yi comments on the situation: "...if Soviet workers live in a living paradise, their Western counterparts work in a real hell".

American capitalism, a thoroughly "evil" force, was depicted also as a threat to the independence of nations all over the globe. After visiting Norway, Yi Ki-yŏng, mimicking the Soviet propaganda statements, boldly claims that, "Norway is turning into an American colony".²⁵⁴ As an irrefutable proof of his thesis he offers the fact that unlike the USSR, "... even the soap in Norway's hotels is made in America".

As a rule, the Soviet propaganda took care to distinguish between the "bad" ruling classes of the Western countries and the potentially good or at least redeemable "masses" who either supported the Communist cause in the depth of their hearts or would do so had they known better. As a testimony to the miserable situation of the working class in Norway and Sweden, in comparison to the Soviet situation, Yi Ki-yŏng mentioned the long queues in Moscow's shops. To his mind, the absence of queues in capitalist shops meant that ordinary people in these countries are too poor to buy products, while Moscow's shops overflowed with people who had lots of money to spend.²⁵⁵

Yet, sometimes in Soviet propaganda the normal ideological line between "good" (exploited) and "bad" (exploiting) Westerners is blurred, offering some concession to the usual xenophobic generalisations which were aimed at winning popularity among the Soviet "rednecks". North Korean travelogues often resorted to a common popular cliché of Soviet propaganda according to which the "Westerners", independent of their class, regional or national differentiation, were weak, cowardly people, and could not conceive of the feats of labour which the tough and energetic Soviet people were able to produce. Yi Puk-myŏng, for instance, retold Soviet stories of "dim-witted foreigners" who refused to believe in the speedy reconstruction of Stalingrad which had been ruined by war. The Soviet people of course proved to be much stronger than the "reactionaries" expected.²⁵⁶

For a time the place of North Korea in this propagandistic scheme was quite clear-cut: it was supposed to be one of the numerous recipients of generous Soviet internationalist benevolence and an object of protection against a common enemy. Min Pyŏng-gyun, eulogizing the "Soviet paradise for the national minorities", made sure that the Korean reader would grasp his message: he stressed that the Soviet Union "is opening up the same paradise for us Koreans".²⁵⁷ North Korean writers at first obediently toed the line, an approach fully reflected in the above-cited "Soviet-Korean friendship stories". Soon, however, the situation began to change.

From the late 1950s North Korea started to position itself as a self-sufficient state with a potentially world-dominating ideology whose destiny was to lead others rather than be led. Thus there emerged the image of North Korea as an independent centre of

²⁵⁴ Yi Ki-yŏng, *Widaehan saenghwal-ül ch'angjohanŭn ssoryŏn*, 53-63.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 100-105.

²⁵⁶ *K'ŭnak'ŭn uŭi*, 64.

²⁵⁷ *K'ŭnak'ŭn uŭi*, 32-35, 36-39.

all the truly progressive forces of the globe. This image was strongly reminiscent of the image of the USSR in old Soviet propaganda, with Pyongyang replacing Moscow as the centre of the Universe. One of the earliest examples of this emerging trend can be seen in Yi T'ae-jun's story "Dear People" ("Kogwihan saramdŭl") (1951),²⁵⁸ which dealt with Chinese-Korean friendship. During a conversation with his Korean friend, the protagonist of the story, a Chinese volunteer in the Korean War, claimed that only his acquaintance with the North Korean Communists and the heroic Korean girl Kim Ok-sil "helped him to understand better his own Chinese Liberation Army and the Chinese Communist Party".

In visual arts the North Koreans tend to depict themselves as the pinnacle of world progress at quite an early stage. Since the early 1960s the depictions of Kim Il Sung, surrounded by happy crowds of Africans or Latin Americans holding his books and admiringly looking upward to him, became a common sight in the glossy propaganda magazines. However in literature the situation was different. The Soviet Stalinist writings readily depicted heroes interacting with people of other cultures and demonstrating their cultural superiority in the process. For instance, the hero of Trifonov's novel *Studenty* (*Students*), who had served in several European countries as a soldier during WWII, came to the inescapable conclusion that "there are a lot of things which should be redone in these places", "the peoples who live abroad still have to learn a lot from us".²⁵⁹ Unlike the Soviet literature, North Korean fiction seldom depicted its heroes dealing directly with foreigners. Though North Korean literature today still uses the image of the DPRK as the hope of all progressive mankind (see, for instance, the above-mentioned poem of Han Chŏng-gyu, "The Words Which I Often Say to My Children"),²⁶⁰ it is quite reluctant to become more specific. For instance, the heroes of the above-mentioned story of Yang Chae-mo, "Lofty Goal,"²⁶¹ learn unspecified "foreign languages", read "foreign newspapers", sympathise with the people of an unspecified "poor foreign country" and criticise "foreign scientists" from "another country which claims itself to be developed". Apparently the author of the story, along with other North Korean authors, feels uncomfortable in the multinational sphere. This is quite natural, given that North Korea is a mono-ethnic state with a strong tradition of ethnocentrism if not xenophobia, without significant ethnic minorities and practically devoid of contacts with the outside world. In North Korean ideology the role of the only visible "other" who "has a lot to learn" from North Korea is bestowed on South Korea which allegedly "languished under American occupation" while dreaming about following the North Korean course. This tendency was already visible in Yi Ki-yŏng's *Ttang* (*Land*) (1948-1949) and Yi T'ae-jun's "Somewhere Near

²⁵⁸ Yi T'ae-jun, "Kogwihan saramdŭl" [Dear People], in *Yi T'ae-jun munhak sŏnjip* [Anthology of Yi T'ae-jun's literature], Seoul: Kip'ŭn saem, 1995. Vol. 3: 147-159.

²⁵⁹ Yurii Trifonov, *Studenty*, 40.

²⁶⁰ Han Chŏng-gyu, "Chasikdŭ-rege chaju hanŭn mal", 130-132.

²⁶¹ Yang Chae-mo, "Nop'ŭn mokp'yo", 304-323.

the 38th Parallel” (“38 sŏn ŏnŭ chigu-esŏ”) (1949),²⁶² works which will be discussed in later relevant chapters, and became especially pronounced after the Korean War.

The roles of a “subjugated enemy” and a “threatening force” in North Korean propaganda were bestowed on the “Japs” and “Yankees”. However, the common Soviet differentiation between “good” (exploited) and “bad” (exploiting) members of foe nations has never been applied to the DPRK world picture. The DPRK stereotypes of “the bestial Japs” and “the weak and vicious Westerners with ugly pale faces” versus “the strong, vigorous and generous North Koreans” soon developed to the level of wild racism which was unthinkable in the multi-national USSR. Yi Ki-yŏng, when writing about the historical past of Korea, eagerly exploited the stereotype “the inhumane Japanese versus the humane Koreans”, which reached extremes in his novel *Han yŏsŏng-ŭi unmyŏng* (*The Fate of a Woman*).²⁶³ In this novel the writer, among other horrifying details of the Japanese occupation, repeated the rumour about bestial Japanese who allegedly killed Koreans and then... used their flesh for fishing. On the other hand, the writings of Han Sŏr-ya, Yi T’ae-jun and other presented clear examples of out-and-out anti-American racism.²⁶⁴ Brian Myers stresses with respect to Han Sŏr-ya’s “Sŭngnyangi” (“Jackals”), that “there is no precedent for this kind of vilification in the Korean literary tradition, nor in socialist realism”.²⁶⁵

With the arrival of the *chuch’e* era in the 1960s, anti-Western stereotypes became favourite topics in North Korean propaganda.²⁶⁶ As a recent example we might cite the above-mentioned story by Yang Chae-mo, “Lofty Goal”.²⁶⁷ The protagonist of this novel, the elderly doctor Yun from a provincial North Korean hospital, debunks a “foreign professor” from “a country which claims itself to be developed”. This professor insisted that he had discovered a new anti-cancer panacea, while in reality the medicine had been invented a number of years ago by a rural North Korean doctor. Also, unlike North Korean doctors, this vicious foreigner does not care about the possible side-effects of his treatment. Though the story is devoid of Han Sŏr-ya’s characteristic blatantly racist notions, an attempt to belittle foreigners as thieves of ideas and cold-hearted people is visible here. Incidentally, the idea of plagiarizing

²⁶² Yi T’ae-jun, “38 sŏn ŏnŭ chigu-esŏ” [Somewhere Near the 38th Parallel], in *Yi T’ae-jun munhak sŏnjip*, [Anthology of Yi T’ae-jun’s literature], Seoul: Kip’ŭn saem, 1995, Vol. 3: 121-129.

²⁶³ Yi Ki-yŏng, *Han nyŏsŏng-ŭi unmyŏng* [The Fate of a Woman], Pyongyang: Chosŏn sahoejuŭl Nodong ch’ŏngnyŏn ch’ulp’ansa, 1965.

²⁶⁴ For a discussion of the racist implications of war-time North Korean literature, read the insightful and well-researched account in Brian Myers, *Han Sŏr-ya and North Korean literature*, 94-109.

²⁶⁵ Ibid., 95-96.

²⁶⁶ Brian Myers even suggests that the anti-Western tendencies in the subsequent North Korean literature might be a part of Han Sŏr-ya’s legacy (See: Ibid., 153).

²⁶⁷ Yang Chae-mo, “Nop’ŭn mokp’yo”, 304-323

foreigners who were ever ready to steal the fruits of Russian/Soviet creativity was very common in the Soviet literature of the late 1940s.²⁶⁸

If we look at the major Soviet patterns in the DPRK literary policy from an historical perspective we will notice that most of them were successfully embedded into the North Korean discourse, though not without predictable adaptation. For instance, in the North Korean version, the rigid clichés of Soviet propaganda sometimes acquired more sentimental forms which reflected the earlier cultural traditions of Korea. Some conventions, such as the concept of a “cultural paradise” were less palpable in the North Korean discourse, while the image of “weak and cowardly” Westerners versus “tough and vital” Koreans was definitely among the favourites. The latter leaned toward an ethnocentric model of the world and could not help but obliterate the pattern of the relations of the USSR/DPRK as an elder/younger brother from the North Korean discourse. (The greatest irony was that, after the triumph of nationalism in the 1960s, the Soviets themselves also eventually joined the list of “pale-faced Western whiners”).

However, the majority of these patterns not merely survived the de-Russification of North Korean life, but under the influence of later political changes in the DPRK, re-emerged in a tougher guise. For instance, the Soviet notion of the essential political engagement of a Communist intellectual in the North Korean discourse was transformed into complete servility to the ruling Communist regime, underpinned by specific forms of control over the writers. Many Stalinist propagandistic truisms which had been quickly forgotten and even ridiculed after Stalin’s death in the USSR, such as eulogies to the sacrifices and suffering of Communist workers on the road to virtually any significant achievement, or the description of the most mundane chores as “struggle” (such as the proverbial annual “struggle for harvest” in the USSR), the concept of self-reliance, or images of “lakes scooped out with bare hands” blossomed in North Korea. And, above all, the basic notion of a “socialist paradise” and its accompanying myths still constitute the cornerstones of the national ideology of the DPRK.

In general, it can be said that North Korean ideologists grasped the torch of Stalinist propaganda at the very moment that the Soviet Union’s own faith in the Communist orthodoxy began to wane. The fates of the writers who took an active part in this re-definition of literature were widely different, but their efforts and experiences

²⁶⁸ Look, for example, at the Soviet biographical movies of the 1940s: in *Michurin* the cunning foreigners steal miraculous seeds developed by a Russian scientist and in *Popov* the Americans make off with Popov’s contraption thus paving the way for the “invention” of the wireless by Marconi (Marconi’s role was never recognized by Soviet officialdom). Even the idea of a dream cure for cancer which was stolen by the cunning foreigners from unsuspecting Russian scientists had a well-known predecessor in Soviet culture: this was a topic of Konstantin Simonov’s 1948 play “Sud chesti” (“Court of Honour”) and its 1950 screen version, both highly acclaimed in the USSR and widely shown in the “fraternal countries”.

were equally instrumental in the emergence of a new model of literature in North Korea.

Chapter 2

SOVIET KOREANS IN NORTH KOREAN LITERATURE: LIVING CONDUCTORS OF “SOCIALIST REALISM” – THE CASE OF CHO KI-CH’ŎN

Cho Ki-ch’ŏn was one of the first Soviet Koreans to enter the country with the Soviet troops in August 1945. The duration of his activity in North Korea was relatively short: it comprised less than six years from his arrival in late August 1945, to July 1951 when he was killed in an American air raid. Yet these final six Korean years of Cho were particularly productive. Cho Ki-ch’ŏn managed to become a leading authority in the Pyongyang literary world. He achieved a high degree of recognition among young North Korean readers and forged good relations with Kim Il Sung which allowed him to exert a profound influence on North Korea’s literary politics as well as on literature itself. Until his untimely death in 1951, Cho’s literary career had been steadily ascending. Even now Cho Ki-ch’ŏn is considered to be one of the founding fathers of NK literature, the pride and glory of the first years of the DPRK’s cultural history.²⁶⁹ He is one of a handful of Soviet Koreans whose work remains officially recognized and honored in the present-day DPRK while the achievements and contributions of other Soviet Koreans were erased from the official history long ago.²⁷⁰

In my opinion, this congruence of the poet with the DPRK literary and political standards was a primary reason why in North Korea his name soon became surrounded by various biographical myths, mostly aimed at downplaying the Soviet aspects of his worldview and stressing his real or imagined “Koreanness”. These myths have long been ingrained in North Korean scholarship and have unavoidably influenced South Korean academics as well. While such influences are not uncommon in South Korean scholarship dealing with North Korean culture (it is sufficient to mention the abundance of incorrect data about Han Sŏr-ya in the works of Seoul academics who, in all probability, uncritically accepted the statements of the North Korean sources),²⁷¹ the situation with Cho Ki-ch’ŏn is quite special. Some recent South Korean publications demonstrate a clear tendency to mythologize Cho’s personality and legacy. In this they are obviously driven by certain political agendas now fashionable in Seoul.

For a long time the approach to Cho was quite straightforward: North Korean, South Korean, and Soviet scholarship alike perceived Cho as an official eulogist for the new society, one who left no grounds to doubt his orthodox Communist beliefs and his unwavering loyalty to the Soviet Stalinist model. Almost all scholars represented Cho Ki-ch’ŏn as the “Korean Maiakovskii”. This depiction implied such qualities as a devotion to Communist ideals, a decisive break with the old literary style and impulsive, even eccentric social behavior, characteristics usually ascribed to Cho’s

²⁶⁹ Interview by telephone with Elena Davydova; “Famous Korean Poet” distributed by Korean Central News Agency. 5 July, 2001.

²⁷⁰ Sin Hyŏng-gi, O Sŏng-ho, *Pukhan munhaksa*, 29.

²⁷¹ Bryan Myers, *Han Sŏr-ya and North Korean Literature*, 6-9.

alleged Soviet archetype, Vladimir Maiakovskii (1893-1930), the founding father of official Soviet literature²⁷² – not to mention the emulation of famous images taken from Maiakovskii's poems (such as the equation of a Communist writer's pen with a bayonet) which often occurred in Cho Ki-ch'ŏn's poetry.²⁷³ This epithet, initially applied to the poet in his lifetime,²⁷⁴ was at the time widely used in both a positive²⁷⁵ and negative²⁷⁶ way.

However, nowadays some South Korean publications suggest another, revised image of Cho Ki-ch'ŏn: Cho the Korean nationalist,²⁷⁷ Cho the partisan of pure poetry, Cho suffering under the pressure of dictatorship, or Cho “fascinated by [Communist] ideology”²⁷⁸ but tragically misled. In his article “Puk-ŭi huip'aram siin Cho Ki-ch'ŏn” [The North Korean “poet of whistle”] South Korean scholar Yi Ch'ang-ju, a director of Pukpang yŏngusŏ (The North Research Institute), went even further and attributed to this founding figure of North Korean literature “an attempt to flee from the North”.²⁷⁹

However, following an intensive study of various sources and data relating to Cho Ki-ch'ŏn, we have come to the conclusion that no matter how tempting it might be to “re-illuminate” this North Korean Communist icon and “humanize” his cultural legacy, the long-established approach to Cho Ki-ch'ŏn proves to be more convincing. New primary sources discovered during my research once again attest to the fact that Cho Ki-ch'ŏn's Communist beliefs were by no means superficial or false. Cho Ki-ch'ŏn, indeed, formed a consistent Communist worldview but this worldview was essentially Soviet, not nationalist Korean, in origin. Cho Ki-ch'ŏn was born and brought up in Stalin's Soviet Union with all that this implied and he came to Korea as

²⁷² Perzhov V.O., Serebrianskii I.M. (ed.). *Maiakovskii. Materialy i issledovaniia* [Maiakovskii. Materials and Research], Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo “Gudozhestvennaia literatura”, 1940; Usievich E. *Vladimir Maiakovskii*, Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1950, 32.

²⁷³ V.N. Li, “Koreiskaia literatura pervykh let posle osvobozhdeniia (1945-1950), 341.

²⁷⁴ Interviews with Chŏng Ryul.

²⁷⁵ See, for instance, a detailed North Korean biography of Cho Ki-ch'ŏn written by Yi Ch'ŏng-gŭ: Yi Ch'ŏng-gu, *Siin Cho Ki-ch'ŏn ron* [Study of the Poet Cho Ki-ch'ŏn], Pyongyang: Munye ch'ŏng ch'ulp'ansa, 1953 or the Soviet article: L.K. Kim, “Poeziia Cho Kich'ona” [The poetry of Cho Ki-ch'ŏn], in *Koreiskaia literatura* [Korean Literature], Moscow: Izdatel'stvo vostochnoi literatury, 1959, 150-179.

²⁷⁶ See, for instance, an anti-Communist work by the South Korean scholar Yi Ki-pong written when the “Cold War” between Seoul and P'yŏngyang was at its height. This book represents Cho Ki-ch'ŏng as an arrogant intruder into Korean literature, but still employs the same epithet. See: Yi Ki-pong, *Puk-ŭi munhak-kwa yesurin*, 219-224.

²⁷⁷ Yim Yŏng-t'ae, Ko Yu-han, *Pukhan 50 nyŏnsa*, Vol.1: 144.

²⁷⁸ “Cho Ki-ch'ŏn chaejomyŏng. ‘Na’ poda ‘uri’ kangyohan sunsujuŭija” [Re-illumination of Cho Ki-ch'ŏn: the Purist Who Worshiped “Us” More than ‘I’], in *Hanguk ilbo*, 08 August 1992.

²⁷⁹ Yi Ch'ang-ju, “Puk-ŭi huip'aram siin Cho Ki-ch'ŏn” [The North Korean “Poet of Whistle”], in *Koryo times: weekly magazine for the foreign Korean community*, 10 August, 1992: 21.

an already ripened product of the Soviet Communist system and served the cause of Communism in North Korea eagerly and enthusiastically.

This chapter is largely based on new primary sources which were discovered during my research trips to Russia and Central Asia. This new material includes Cho's personal dossier, a copy of which was kept by his family, and his letters and private papers. Of great help in reconstructing the picture of Cho's life and activity were interviews with the people who were once personally close to Cho, especially his only son Cho Yurii,²⁸⁰ and his friend Chŏng Ryul. An interview with Elena Davydova, a Russian-Korean translator and North Korean citizen now living in Pyongyang, sheds light on the perception of the poet by the contemporary North Korean literary establishment and its current attitude to Cho's legacy.²⁸¹ I feel particularly grateful to Cho Yurii who gave me access to some important materials from the family archive: Cho Ki-ch'ŏn's personal file,²⁸² the letters of Cho's university girlfriend Liia Grigorievna Yudolevitch²⁸³ containing memoirs regarding the poet, and Cho Ki-ch'ŏn's final letter, sent to his wife from Pyongyang on 13 April, 1951.

Cho Ki-ch'ŏn: The pre-Korean experience.

The first myth surrounding Cho Ki-ch'ŏn concerns the poet's birthplace and his early childhood. The South Korean *Dictionary of North Korean Literature* insists that Cho Ki-ch'ŏn was born in Hwaryŏng county, in the province of Hamgyŏng-pukto,²⁸⁴ on November 6th 1913. It is also stated that while still a child his family "fled the oppression of the Japanese colonial authorities" in Korea for Russian Siberia. This has been reiterated in a number of South Korean publications. For instance, Yun Chae-kŭn and Pak Sang-ch'ŏn in their collective work affirmed that "Cho Ki-ch'ŏn had gone abroad to the Soviet Union for study and returned home after Liberation. This can explain why he produced so many pro-Soviet works".²⁸⁵ Authors of *A Historical and Cultural Dictionary*, published in English went even further – they claim that Cho Ki-

²⁸⁰ Interviews with Cho Yurii.

²⁸¹ Interview by telephone with Elena Davydova.

²⁸² "Lichnyi listok po uchetu kadrov". Official questionnaire, completed by Cho Ki-ch'ŏn. 18 June 1946. A copy is now kept in the author's archive. Such personal files were compiled in the former USSR every time a person took a new job. The file forms were filled out by the person himself and then checked by the employer. Often people were given an extra form or two, to better prepare a draft. One such draft was kept by Cho's family.

²⁸³ Private letters of Cho Ki-ch'ŏn's girlfriend Liia Grigorievna Yudolevitch, written to the poet's son Cho Yurii in 1977. The originals of the undated letters are now kept in the author's archive.

²⁸⁴ Yi Myŏng-jae, *Pukhan munhak sajŏn* [Dictionary of North Korean literature], Seoul: Kukhak charyowŏn, 1995, 942.

²⁸⁵ Yun Chae-kŭn, Pak Sang-ch'ŏn, *Pukhan-ŭi hyŏndae munhak* [Contemporary North Korean Literature], Seoul: Koryŏwŏn, 1990, Vol 2: 176.

ch'ŏn allegedly was, along with Yi Ki-yŏng and Han Sŏr-ya...a member of the KAPF, Korean Proletarian Artists Federation.²⁸⁶

However, Cho Ki-chŏn's personal file provides us with different information. According to this official Soviet data, Cho was born in 1913 in a village called Ael'tugeu in the Vladivostok district of the Russian Far East²⁸⁷ to a family of poor Korean peasants. Cho Yurii, a son of the poet, and Chŏng Ryul, a disciple and close friend of Cho from the Soviet period, confidently confirmed this.²⁸⁸ Both asserted that Cho Ki-chŏn was born in Russia and had never been in Korea before he entered the country with the Soviet Army in 1945.

In all probability, the incorrect information concerning Cho Ki-chŏn's birthplace has been uncritically taken from North Korean sources. North Korean scholars are determined to prove the "purely Korean" origins of any cultural phenomena they believe to be valuable,²⁸⁹ and Cho Ki-ch'ŏn's case fully reflects this tendency. For instance, *Anthology of Cho Ki-chŏn* published in 1952, soon after the poet's death, states that: "Cho Ki-chŏn, a fighting poet and a son of the Korean nation, was born on the 6th of February, 1913 in Hwaryŏng district, in the province of Hamgyŏng-pukto, to a family of poor peasants. In his childhood he joined the struggle against Japanese imperialism and for that reason moved to a progressive country, the Soviet Union. There he displayed his talents in acquiring the progressive culture of the Soviet Union".²⁹⁰ Even in this early statement we see the obvious signs of myth-making. The background attributed here is that of the common North Korean heroic image: he is supposed to be both a native and poor, subjected to oppression but determined to resist. The North Korea authors show no concern that their Hero was obviously too young to make the conscious choice of a "progressive country" as his destination.

The story of the alleged indigenous Korean roots of Cho Ki-ch'ŏn had grown to epic proportions in a monograph written in 1953 by Yi Chŏng-gu, an influential North Korean scholar. This supposedly scholarly work is imbued with specious passages on the imaginary past of Cho. Describing the Soviet period of Cho Ki-chŏn's life, for instance, Yi Chŏng-gu writes: "When he was giving lectures at the university or deep at night, when he felt tired of writing poems, familiar scenes rose before his eyes, scenes he had never forgotten. Beautiful Korean landscapes, faces of the people from his hometown which he missed so badly—they all sparkled in his head like lightning. At

²⁸⁶ Keith Pratt and Richard Rutt, with additional material by James Hoare, *Korea, A Historical and Cultural Dictionary*, Great Britain: Curzon, 1999, 260.

²⁸⁷ "Lichnyi listok".

²⁸⁸ Interview with Ch'ŏng Ryul.

²⁸⁹ In fact, foreign connections and influences are anathema to official DPRK scholarship. In the early 1950s the North Korean press tried not to mention the foreign connections of the new regime's leaders, once again in order to portray them as "authentic Koreans". The Soviet origins of North Korean prominent officials were never mentioned in the press even at the time when the "unbreakable friendship" of the USSR and North Korea was widely extolled in the press. For example, Kim Il Sung's four-year stay in the USSR during WWII was a secret in North Korea until very recently.

²⁹⁰ *Cho Ki-chŏn sŏnjip*, Vol.1:1.

that moment an impulsive hatred rose in his heart, hatred against the Japanese colonial authorities who had pushed his family out of their native land”.²⁹¹

These claims were supported by early Soviet scholarship, either because they simply followed the official North Korean media, or because they wanted to downplay the Soviet involvement with the North (the very presence of the Soviet Koreans in the DPRK was seen as a major secret at the time). For example, a Soviet-Korean scholar wrote in 1954: “The remarkable event in the poet’s life was his arrival in the Soviet Union where he came as a youngster. It is not incidental that Cho, who returned to his home country after a long stay in the USSR, became a leader of Korean socialist realist poetry.”²⁹²

A recent document distributed by the North Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) attests to the fact that this officially endorsed biography of Cho Ki-ch’ôn has remained unchanged in North Korea. The material “Famous Korean Poet” describes Cho’s early years as follows: “Cho Ki-ch’ôn was a passionate poet produced by Korea. Born in Hoeryong, North Hamgyong Province, he was well known in the surrounding areas for his outstanding poetic talent from childhood. However, he was unable to bring his talent to bloom as he was forced to live abroad as part of a stateless nation. It was not until Liberation (15 August 1945) of the country that he could realize his dream”.²⁹³ Hence, as we have seen, North Korean scholarship sustains the myth created in the 1940s. Also, by omitting the date of Cho’s alleged departure from Korea, the unknown author intentionally gives the impression that he left the country as an accomplished poet or, at least, as an adult.

We would like to stress, however, that defining Cho Ki-chôn as foreign-born (and foreign-educated) poet we do not imply any lack of “Koreanness” in his life or upbringing. Though born abroad Cho Ki-chôn was indeed raised as a Korean, not as a Russian. To understand this we must take into account the situation in his native milieu, the Korean community in the Russian Far East in the early 20th century.

From the late 1860s until their forcible resettlement in 1937 the Korean community in first Russia, then the Soviet Far East was numerous and steadily increasing.²⁹⁴ The Koreans largely lived in their own villages and had limited interaction with the surrounding Russian communities. The Soviet Koreans possessed a solid system of national education. German Kim, a leading authority on the history of the Soviet Korean community, wrote: “Up to the moment of their forcible resettlement from the Far Eastern region, Koreans exercised their rights to receive education in their

²⁹¹ Yi Ch’ông-gu, *Siin Cho Ki-ch’ônron*, 6.

²⁹² A.N. Ten, *Ocherki sovremennoi koreiskoi literatury* [Study of contemporary Korean literature], Leningrad: Herzen Institute, 1954, 459.

²⁹³ “Famous Korean Poet” distributed by KCNA. July 5, 2001.

²⁹⁴ In 1917 about 81, 825 Koreans lived in the Far-Eastern region of Russia. They comprised one third of the total population of the region. In 1923 the number of Koreans in the region grew to 120,982 (see: Kim German and Sim Yông-sop, *Istoriia prosvetsheniia koreitsev Rossii i Kazahstana* [History of the education of Koreans of Russia and Kazakhstan], Alma-Ata: Kazak universiteti, 2000, 93-96.

native language. Korean schools operated at all levels, and there were also Korean technical colleges and a Korean Teachers College. The non-Korean universities had departments and faculties where instruction was in Korean”.²⁹⁵ Recollecting his youth in the Far Eastern region in the early 1930s, Chŏng Ryul confirmed that the system of primary and secondary Korean education in the Soviet Union of the 1920s and 1930s had been able to provide a good grounding in the natural sciences and the Korean language, albeit lacking in some aspects of the humanities curriculum such as calligraphy, Chinese characters, and Korean history and literature. Nevertheless, this deficiency was partially compensated for by home education within Korean families. Soviet Koreans also had many opportunities to acquaint themselves with traditional and modern Korean literature because until the mid-1930s the new publications were imported to Russia from Korea in large quantities.²⁹⁶ In most families, including Cho Ki-chŏn’s, parents taught their children Chinese characters as well.²⁹⁷

Cho Ki-chŏn graduated from a Korean school in the Soviet Far East. His friend Chŏng Ryul, and his son Cho Yurii, confirm that Cho spoke Korean, not Russian, at home and in everyday life.²⁹⁸ Chŏng also recalls Cho Ki-chŏn as a well-educated man, who often used quotations from modern and classical Korean literature. When Cho was 17 years old, he published his first poem in a local Korean newspaper *Sŏnbong* (“*Avant-garde*”).²⁹⁹ In the years 1930-33 he continued to contribute to this newspaper. *Sŏnbong* published his poems under such telling titles as “The Morning of the Construction”, “To the Advanced Workers”, “The Military Field Study”, “Paris Commune” and so on. These verses were unabashedly political and propagandist, and were replete with the hyperbolized images that later became so typical of Cho Ki-ch’ŏn’s Pyongyang poetry.³⁰⁰ The above-cited North Korean scholar Yi Chŏng-gu asserts that these early verses brought Cho Ki-ch’ŏn wide popularity among the local readership,³⁰¹ but such statements are hard to verify now.

Cho continued his education in the Korean Teachers College in Voroshilov-Ussuriisk (1928-1931). This institution (Rus. *Tehnikum*) was a place where many future teachers of Korean schools received their education. In 1928-1932, Cho was a member of the Communist Youth League (Komsomol) and in 1946 he became a candidate for the Communist Party (candidate card # 8234828). From 1931 to 1933 Cho attended “editors’ courses” in Khabarovsk where young educated Koreans were trained to become editors in the Korean language press. The next step in his education was the Pedagogic University named after Gorky and located in Omsk, where Cho

²⁹⁵ Ibid., 113.

²⁹⁶ Interview with Chŏng Ryul.

²⁹⁷ Ibid.

²⁹⁸ Interviews with Chŏng Ryul and Cho Yurii.

²⁹⁹ Yi Myŏng-jae, *Pukhan munhak sajŏn*, 942.

³⁰⁰ L.K.Kim, “Poeziia Cho Ki-ch’ŏna”, 150-151. Kim gives Korean titles of Cho’s poems in Russian translation.

³⁰¹ Yi Chŏng-gu, *Siin Cho Ki-ch’ŏn ron*, 5.

studied in the Faculty of Literature (1933-1937). At this university the students were taught in Russian. Information on this period was well documented in the letters of Cho Ki-chŏn's girlfriend, Liia Yudolevitch, a student at the same university.³⁰²

Liia Yudolevitch writes that she first met Cho in 1933 in class and subsequently was his constant companion in the classroom. She helped Cho with Russian and became one of his "closest friends". Liia Yudolevitch describes Cho as a popular student and reports that Marxist philosophy was one of his favorite subjects. Cho was quite adept at polemics and eagerly took part in the numerous political disputes popular at the time. Liia highlights the same traits that Chŏn Ryul stresses in Cho: his gentleness in everyday life, but his ability to change radically during public meetings and political discussions, when he was suddenly transformed into a fervent orator and an emotional propagandist of Communist ideas. This transformation may appear awkward to his Korean colleagues but his Soviet friends perceived it as a sign of praiseworthy "Communist spontaneity". It seems that years of study in Omsk matured the "Russian" side of Cho Ki-chŏn. In addition, the entire university environment was strongly politicized and this gave an added impetus to Cho's behavior. Here are some quotes from Liia's letters to Cho Yurii, the poet's son:

"Cho was a man of principle; he was very honest and direct. He has never made excuses, even for friends. I recollect one incident that shows this clearly. Books and teaching materials in the university library were in short supply so we used them in turn. One day it so happened that I borrowed a book out of turn. I remember what a dressing-down he gave me! He shamed me for my unfair behaviour. His accusation was justified and I was not hurt, I just felt awfully ashamed of myself".

"He was a man with inner pride. When he felt offended he acted emotionally and he would boil, seethe with indignation".

"He was a marvelous man – very committed, with a steady political world view... He became our dearest comrade".

The above-mentioned characteristics hardly sound now like loving descriptions of a former boyfriend, which is what they really were. However they convey the Soviet atmosphere of those years when young people in love called each other "comrade", and when a "steady, uncompromising political worldview" was considered the best personal trait. As Liia Yudolevitch herself wrote: "We are the generation of the 1930s, those remarkable and wonderful years. My comrades and I have always been proud of our contemporaries as symbolized by Pavel Korchagin. Those years were full of hardships - no paper, no good clothes - but it was a beautiful time. All the country lived under the slogans "Let's do it!" ("Dayosch!" in Russian-TG) "Let's do Kuzbass!", "Let's do Magnitka"³⁰³ ...It was so exiting".

Liia Yudolevitch described Cho as a gifted student who read books in Russian very quickly and gave brilliant presentations. In her opinion, this skill can be partly explained by his previous experience as a journalist in the newspapers of the Far East.

³⁰² Letters of Liia Yudolevitch.

³⁰³ Major Soviet industrial projects of the early 1930s.

She also stressed that Cho was very concerned about Korea and often wrote poems about people of that distant country: “He loved Korean people very much, and his later personal fate is no surprise to me. He told me a lot about the life of Korean farming folks and said that he would go to fight for a better life for the Korean peasantry...He used to write poems in the library after we had finished studying. He would sit nearby and write with great concentration. Sometimes he raised his head and would start to relate emotionally how difficult the life of a Korean peasant was. He insisted that they had to fight against the Japanese yoke... He talked about the industriousness of the Korean people and described poor old Korean men who were exhausted by labor. He depicted the scene as if he had seen it with his own eyes. I was touched by his ardency, by the sincerity of his invectives. He told me he was going to write an epic poem about Korea”.

After graduation they parted and Liia had no accurate information about Cho’s life thereafter. She heard later that he had entered University in Moscow. But, as we shall see, this information was wrong. Cho never studied in any Moscow university for the following reasons:

In 1937 Cho returned to the Far East, where he got a teaching job in the Korean Pedagogical Institute (a four-year college). According to his file, Cho worked there from August 1937 to August 1938. However, in 1937 all ethnic Koreans from the Soviet Far East were relocated to Central Asia. The Korean Pedagogical Institute was also moved from Vladivostok to Kzyl-Orda in Khazakhstan.³⁰⁴ In this college where Cho taught world literature, he met Chǒng Ryul, a student at the time. As Chǒng Ryul recalls, when in 1938 Russian became the language of tuition in the Korean Pedagogical University, Cho became very upset at the practice and even expressed resentment at the forcible resettlement of Koreans, a very dangerous sentiment at the time.³⁰⁵

The following year was marked by a significant episode in Cho’s life – his temporary imprisonment. According to both Chǒng Ryul and Cho Yurii, in 1938 Cho made a decision to continue his education as a post-graduate student in the Moscow Literature University. In the summer of 1938, during the school vacation, he collected all the necessary papers in Kzyl-Orda and left for Moscow to apply for admission. But he was not even allowed to apply: a new law restricted the movement of Koreans and prohibited them from leaving the officially defined settlements in Central Asia. As soon as Cho arrived in Moscow and showed his documents at the reception center of the Literature University he was arrested for violating the registration law.³⁰⁶ The situation was critical; in accordance with Stalinist judicial practice Cho could be easily executed on a charge of spying. Fortunately, one of his high-ranking Korean friends, Cho Tong-kyu who held an influential position in the NKVD (the former name of the KGB) intervened on his behalf and arranged for Cho’s release after several months in prison.

³⁰⁴ “Lichnyi listok...”

³⁰⁵ Interview with Chǒng Ryul.

³⁰⁶ Interview with Cho Yurii.

Moreover, he somehow managed to erase the records of this incident from Cho Ki-ch'ŏn's files.

As one might expect, Cho hid the entire incident from his friends. Only his family members knew about it. Cho Yurii keeps a photo of his father soon after his release—with a short haircut which was a telltale sign of a Soviet ex-prisoner. After this incident Cho returned to Kzyl-Orda. When Chŏng Ryul met him there, Cho explained that he had been prohibited from entering Moscow University because of the new legal status of Koreans. At the time Cho appeared very disappointed and said to Chŏng Ryul: “Now I do not believe in the so-called Leninist national policy any more. The alleged freedom for all the nations in the USSR is a fiction. Nobody here needs us Koreans. They do not want our language and schools; they do not want us either”.³⁰⁷ However, this critical perception bordering on outright rebellion did not influence Cho's later life and probably did not last very long.

Cho then abandoned his dreams of education in Moscow or Leningrad. From August 1938 to December 1941 he worked as a teacher in the Pedagogic University of Kzyl-Orda (Kazakhstan). This was essentially the same Korean Pedagogical Institute that in 1938 had been renamed and transformed into a Russian-language school. Then he returned to journalism.³⁰⁸ From December 1941 to September 1942 Cho worked as a translator in a local newspaper in Kzyl-Orda and then was drafted into the Soviet Army. From September 1942 to December 1943 he served in the Soviet 25th army as an “instructing writer” in the editing office (Rus.: *instructor-literator redaktzii*) at the army's headquarters which at the time was located in Voroshilov-Ussuriisk. From November 1943 to July 1945 he served in the Political Department of the Pacific Navy as a “writer in the editing office” (Rus.: *literator redaktzii*) in Khabarovsk. From August to October 1945 Cho served in the Political Department of the Primorskii Military District as a chief of department of local affairs in the editing office (Korean language) (Rus.: *nachal'nik otdela mestnoi zhizni redaktzii*). From October 1945 he worked as a “writer in the editing office” (Rus.: *literator redaktzii*) of the Political Department of the First Far Eastern front.³⁰⁹

A recent South Korean publication insists that Cho was forcibly recruited into the Red army.³¹⁰ Yet this information is hardly probable. At the time a brutal but popular war was being waged with Nazi Germany in the Soviet Union (1941-1945), so most males in the country were subject to military service and most of them were willing to fight. According to Cho Yurii, his father was happy to learn that he had been recruited

³⁰⁷ Interview with Chŏng Ryul

³⁰⁸ Letters of Liia Yudolevitch.

³⁰⁹ *Lichnyi listok po uchetu kadrov*. Copy kept in the author's archive.

³¹⁰ Hong Chŏng-sŏn etc, “Ŭnp'ye, waegok... Kim Il Sung's ch'eje “hŭisaengyang”” [Re-illumination of Cho Ki-ch'ŏn: Silenced and Distorted... Scapegoated by Kim Il Sung's System], *Hanguk ilbo*, 05 August 1992, 4; “Cho Ki-ch'ŏn chaejomyŏng. 'Na' poda 'uri' kangyohan sunsujuŭija”, 4.

for it meant that he was trusted in spite of such taints in his biography as a “suspicious” nationality and a brief imprisonment. The same feelings have been expressed by many other ethnic Koreans who perceived the draft as a sign of their acquittal and even privilege. As a rule, most Soviet Koreans were barred from military service during the war on the grounds that they were from an “unreliable ethnic group”.³¹¹

In his file Cho mentions that he “took part in the campaign against the Japanese imperialists as a writer and editor in the Korean language” (Rus. “literator redaktsii na koreaiskom yasyke”). The military regulations prevented Cho from sharing much information about this period of his life with his family. However, it is clear from his CV that his main activity was related to psychological operations, then run by the network of “7th departments” within the political departments of the Soviet Army. Chŏng Ryul, a former marine who took part in amphibious operations on the Korean coast, recalls the convincing, touching and skillfully written propaganda leaflets which the Red Army spread over Korea during those days. After Liberation and already in Korea, Chŏng Ryul found out that the author of those leaflets was none other than Cho Ki-chŏn. The South Korean scholar Yi Ki-Pong also mentions Cho’s name among those Soviet Korean editors who had supposedly translated into Korean the first speech of Kim Il Sung. The future North Korean leader delivered this speech (actually written by the Soviet military administration) when he made his first appearance before the Korean public in October 1945.³¹²

By this time Cho Ki-ch’ŏn already had a family. In the late 1930s, he married Kim Hae-sŏn and had a son named Yurii (born 24 April, 1939) by her. Cho Yurii strictly denies that he ever had the Korean name “Cho Uk-chin” (which is mentioned in the article in *Hanguk ilbo*)³¹³ or any other Korean name. The fact that Cho gave only a Russian name to his son testifies to the fact that at that stage Cho Ki-ch’ŏn associated his family’s future with the USSR, not with Korea. However, the situation changed and in late summer 1945 the 32 year old Cho entered North Korea with the troops of the Soviet Army. He had never previously left the Soviet Union and socialism was the only way of life he had experienced. The communist worldview was not a distant inspiration for him but a world he had been brought up in. Given these circumstances, the assertion that Cho had been a sensitive intellectual (somewhat like Yi T’ae-jun), romantically “fascinated with Communist ideas” is untenable.

Cho Ki-ch’ŏn in North Korea

Cho began his career in the Red Army’s Korean-language newspaper *Chosŏn sinmun*. He published there a number of poems and also translated the Soviet poets Maiakovskii, Gribachev, and Dzhambul into Korean.³¹⁴ He visited plants and villages

³¹¹ Interview with Chŏng Ryul.

³¹² Yi Ki-Pong, *Pukui munhak-kwa yesurin*, 143.

³¹³ “Cho Ki-ch’ŏn chaechomyŏng. Na’ poda ‘uri’ kangyohan sunsujuŭija”.

³¹⁴ L.K. Kim, “Poeziia Cho Ki-ch’ŏna”, 146; Yi Myŏng-jae, *Pukhan munhak sajŏn*, 942-945.

(under the slogan “immersion in the masses”)³¹⁵ and wrote poems on the recent land reform and industrialization.³¹⁶ In addition he often gave lectures on Soviet literary theory and politics and on the history of world literature, and took part in numerous literary conventions and discussions.³¹⁷

According to the recollections of Chŏng Ryul, Cho quickly immersed himself in this new atmosphere. He made a lot of Korean friends and took part in numerous political meetings and seminars in Pyongyang. Cho enjoyed his new status and responsibility while at the same time appreciating the material stability of his new life. Like other Soviet Koreans, Cho received a salary from both the Soviet Army and the Korean agencies he was working for. These arrangements made Soviet Koreans affluent by the standards of 1940s Pyongyang.³¹⁸

However, Cho Ki-ch’ŏn’s official life was far from trouble-free. The factional rivalry in North Korean literary circles was rapidly becoming a persistent problem. This constant of the North Korean literary reality was so significant that many defectors to South Korea made the factional strife the central topic of their writing. Brian Myers in his work on Han Sŏr-ya even expressed the regret that these defectors “concentrated so exclusively on factional struggles at the expense of policy developments and literary issues”.³¹⁹

Indeed, almost all North Korean writers belonged to one of several factions that were constantly fighting with each other. The three most influential factions were: a) ex-KAPF members, b) former South Korean writers who moved to the North (kor. wolbuk chakka), and c) Soviet Koreans.³²⁰ Cho Ki-chŏn became a leader of the Soviet Korean faction, which included all Soviet Koreans but also included some local employees of the *Chosŏn sinmun* and a few local Korean associates.³²¹ The “Soviet faction” in literature was closely connected to its political counterpart – the “Soviet faction” in the country’s leadership which at the time included a number of Soviet Koreans.

Like other factions, the Soviet Koreans were striving for influence in the NK literary scene. However, some serious impediments hindered this process. Firstly, the entire attitude toward Russia and Russians in post-Liberation Korea was rather ambiguous – despite the powerful barrage of pro-Soviet propaganda which began in 1946. Before Liberation Korean intellectuals had been fond of Russian culture and leftists had admired the Great October Revolution and Communism. However in 1945, when the Korean citizens met Soviet Russians face to face, their attitude changed

³¹⁵ L.K. Kim, “Poeziia Cho Ki-ch’ŏna”, 146-147.

³¹⁶ Pak Nam-su, *Chŏkch’i 6 nyŏn pukhan mundan*, 60.

³¹⁷ Ibid., 81-83.

³¹⁸ Interview with Chŏng Ryul.

³¹⁹ Bryan Myers, *Han Sŏr-ya and North Korean Literature*, 4.

³²⁰ Pak Nam-su, *Chŏkch’i 6 nyŏn pukhan mundan*, 104-107.

³²¹ Ibid., 104.

somewhat. The Soviet troops on the Korean peninsula engaged in large-scale pillage, rape, and plunder, which could not help but produce bad feelings among the Koreans.³²² Though the harsh measures of the Soviet commanders led to a decline in the number of such incidents in 1946, the initial impression was too strong to erase. The bad reputation of the Red Army inevitably influenced the perception of the Soviet Koreans as well. This was also reinforced by the increasing persecution of the Nationalist Right, whose leaders had a large number of supporters within the country. The rightists often perceived the situation in the North as a simple change of occupying power: the Japanese gave way to the Soviet Russians.

Secondly, the sudden political rise of newcomers openly supported by foreign forces could not help but annoy local native Koreans including those who were inclined to support the emerging Communist government. Elena Davydova in her interview continuously stressed the importance of the terms “aliens” and “outsiders” in the relationships between Soviet and native Koreans, and between South and North Korean native writers. The irritation Korean intellectuals might have felt towards the Soviet Korean newcomers was also aggravated by some additional factors. Though Koreans in language and appearance, Soviet Koreans often behaved in “strange” and unexpected ways.³²³

A shortsighted policy of the Soviet authorities was also partially responsible for the alienation between the local and Soviet Koreans. The Soviet Koreans who were supposed to be intermediaries between the Soviets and Koreans were nevertheless treated as ordinary Soviet citizens abroad and thus were rigorously controlled in all their actions by the Soviet agencies. The “excessive” interaction with the locals was a major concern for the Soviet officials who supervised the Soviet citizens overseas. Chŏng Ryul recalls that Soviet Koreans were strictly discouraged from forming close relationships with local Koreans. Each contact with native Koreans had to be reported to “special agencies” of the Soviet embassy. When celebrating birthdays Chŏng Ryul had to give separate parties for Soviet and native Korean guests. Marriages between Soviet Koreans and local Koreans were very rare. The children of Soviet Koreans in Pyongyang attended “Soviet Army schools” and after 1953, “High School Number Six,” both of which were inaccessible to ordinary Koreans.³²⁴ In these schools the language of tuition was Russian and their curriculum closely followed the Soviet pattern. Most Soviet Korean children did not communicate with the local Korean children and often spoke poor Korean. This practice vividly reminded Koreans of the special schools for Japanese children in Korean cities during colonial times.³²⁵

The high standards of living of the Soviet Koreans were also serious grounds for resentment. Soviet Koreans were much more affluent than their local colleagues. Like

³²² Brian Myers, *Han Sŏr-ya and North Korean Literature*, 46.

³²³ Sŏng Hye-rang, *Tŭngnamu chip*, 56.

³²⁴ Andrei Lankov, *Severnaia Koreia: Vchera i Segodnia* [North Korea: Yesterday and Today], Moscow: Vostochnaia literatura, 1995, 174-175.

³²⁵ Interview with Chŏng Ryul.

the families of the colonial rulers, many Soviet Koreans employed Korean servants while their spouses were in fact full-time housewives. Chŏng Ryul recollects that this lifestyle annoyed his Korean colleagues who were not able to spoil themselves in this way. As a result the native Koreans were irritated by the contradiction between the official image of the Soviets as the protectors of the poor and the repository of the altruistic Communist spirit, and the real people who enjoyed a high level of material comfort and isolated themselves from the impoverished locals.

All these factors, greatly reinforced by Korean tradition of factionalism, inevitably alienated the native Koreans from their Soviet Korean colleagues. Though Cho Ki-chŏn was modest in his daily life and eagerly made friends with local Koreans³²⁶ he could not avoid the estrangement either. In addition, his emotional fervour and intolerance in political disputes, treated as a virtue in the Stalinist Soviet Union, often set him against the locals.

The hostile attitude toward Cho and the other Soviet Koreans was amply conveyed in the memoirs of Pak Nam-su. Pak, in spite of some attempts to appear calm and objective, was a sharp critic of Cho Ki-ch'ŏn. In general, Pak's work is significant because it provides important information about the literary atmosphere of the late 1940s. However, these records must be used with care for reasons I would like to explain.

Chŏng Ryul recollected that Pak Nam-su maintained a very high profile in the NK literary scene. Humble and quiet, Pak was eager to demonstrate his loyalty to all of his superiors. Chŏng Ryul remembers the uneasy feeling he had every time the poet, in spite of his being several years older, would respectfully bow to him first. While in the North, Pak had never shown any animosity to Cho Ki-ch'ŏn. The literary activity of Pak Nam-su does not show any traces of dissent either. When in 1949 *Glory to Stalin*, an anthology of obligatory homage to Stalin, was published under the editorship of Han Sŏr-ya, Pak Nam-su contributed three poems. Most of the other contributors meanwhile wrote only one or two. The poems glorified Stalin and Russians: "A Paean to Stalin" ("Sŭtalin ch'anga"), "Tower" ("T'ap") (the "tower" refers to the Morangbong monument erected in Pyongyang to honor the Soviet army), and "A Photo" ("Sajin").³²⁷ In "A Paean to Stalin" Pak Nam-su called the Soviet dictator "a sun, a person whose name is reflected even in the hearts of Negroes and Arabs".³²⁸ In "A Photo" the author sentimentally recollects a farewell exchange of photos with some "kind uncle Nikolai, an uncle in the Soviet Army, who waved his big hand which had beaten the Japanese". In the poem "Tower" Pak Nam-su eulogises the "Soviet soldiers with red stars on their foreheads who liberated Korea".

³²⁶ Ibid.

³²⁷ Han Sŏr-ya (ed.), *Yŏnggwang-ŭi Ssŭttalin-ege: Ssŭttalin t'ansaeng 70-chunyŏn kinyŏm ch'ulp'an*, 26-36, 167-170, 260.

³²⁸ Ibid., 28.

No wonder Pak's North Korean colleagues were amazed to learn that such a person had defected to the South.³²⁹ They would probably have been more stunned had they had an inkling of the anti-Communist, anti-Soviet, and rigorously nationalistic rhetoric Pak was to use in his Seoul book published in 1952, a mere 3 years after his "A Paean to Stalin". For this reason I cannot agree with Brian Myers who believes that Pak Nam-su (Hyŏn)'s memoirs are "surprisingly evenhanded".³³⁰ To my mind, Pak's memoirs were scarcely more evenhanded than his poems in honor of the Soviet dictator. Rather, the book was written as a propaganda exercise to slander Pak's erstwhile partners, friends, and employers. For this reason the book contains a number of intentional falsifications and such a characteristic cliché of anti-Communist propaganda as the stories about the alleged practice of "exchanging wives" in Russian families.³³¹

Two chapters of Pak's memoirs are almost exclusively devoted to Cho Ki-ch'ŏn, while other parts of his book are dotted with remarks about him. The book's third chapter even has the sarcastic title "How a genius was made" and deals with the most significant episodes of Cho Ki-ch'ŏn's North Korean biography, his ascent in the Pyongyang literary scene and disputes over the *Paektusan* poem.

Pak asserts that before coming to Korea Cho, like the other Soviet Koreans, spoke bad, almost incomprehensible Korean,³³² but his works soon achieved model status in North Korea; they were published in many editions, used as study materials in universities and literary circles, and awarded the so-called Festival Prize (a Korean analog of the Soviet Stalin Prize, the nation's highest literary award).³³³ Explaining Cho's unusual success, Pak points not only to the support of Cho by the Soviets, but also by native Korean "assistants" especially by Kim Cho-gyu (born in 1914). Kim Cho-gyu was employed at the *Chosŏn sinmun* as an "editor" but, Pak insists, his main task was to rewrite the allegedly unreadable works of Soviet Koreans.³³⁴

To summarize Pak's assertions, the poems of Cho Ki-ch'ŏn and other Soviet Korean writers were in fact written with the help of native Korean editors, for the Soviet Koreans allegedly did not know Korean well enough. This is obviously a propaganda exercise. As we know, Cho Ki-ch'ŏn's native language was Korean, not Russian. That is why Cho used to translate poems by Gribachev and Maiakovskii into Korean.³³⁵ But, like the other Soviet Koreans, he had never undertaken translations

³²⁹ Interview with Chŏng Ryul.

³³⁰ Brian Myers, *Han Sŏr-ya and North Korean literature*, 4.

³³¹ In reality, after the 1930s the Stalinist Soviet society, which at first supported certain popular ideas about sexual liberation, began to reinforce a very rigid traditionalist approach to family issues.

³³² Pak Nam-su, *Chŏkch'i 6 nyŏn pukhan mundan*, 78, 90.

³³³ *Ibid.*, 88, 94.

³³⁴ *Ibid.*, 78, 90.

³³⁵ Yi Myŏn-jae, *Pukhan munhak sajŏn...*, 943.

from Korean into Russian.³³⁶ The system of Korean education in the Soviet Union before 1937 provided opportunities for full training in the Korean language up to the tertiary level. The only problem of the Soviet Koreans was their enduring North-Eastern dialect, which might have been regarded with disdain by some Korean intellectuals. Indeed, arrogance towards regional accents has deep roots in the Korean tradition. Another refugee, Yi Ch'öl-chu, referring to the Soviet Koreans and Ki Sök-pok in particular, also scorns his "clumsy Hamgyöng dialect" in his memoirs.³³⁷ Söng Hye-rang, writing quite recently, also refers to the same accent as a telltale mark of Ki Sök-pok and other Soviet Koreans.³³⁸ As for the work of Pak Nam-su, in the other sections the Hamgyöng-do natives are described with great irony, as primitive and uneducated rustics.³³⁹

Chöng Ryul and Cho Yurii recollect that Cho always wrote his poems by himself and did so openly, under the gaze of his family members and friends, often asking for their judgment. Cho Yurii recollects his father reading aloud the parts of his unfinished poems to his friends and family.³⁴⁰ Chöng Ryul remembers particularly that Cho used to read his freshly written verses to his wife, who, in Chöng Ryul's opinion, "did not know a thing about poetry".³⁴¹ Chöng Ryul wondered why Cho listened to his wife's advice on such a lofty subject as poetry. Cho, convinced of the necessity of the "popular spirit" in socialist literature, used to answer: "If she understands, it means that everybody will understand. I must write in the most comprehensible manner possible".

Accustomed to discussing his verse, Cho could indeed have sought Kim Cho-gyu's opinion and even accepted some editing. A Pyongyang native and a lyrical poet with close connections to the Soviet Koreans, Kim Cho-gyu was a well-educated man who once majored in English.³⁴² Being a personal friend of Cho Ki-ch'ön and an employee of the *Chosön sinmun*,³⁴³ Kim might in fact have been a good advisor. But it seems rather unlikely that he actually *rewrote* Cho's verse. The styles of both poets were very different. While Kim Cho-gyu wrote in quite a traditional manner, Cho Ki-ch'ön's poetic style was very distinctive. Pak Nam-su also mentions Cho's specific writing technique though deriding it as "abnormal" and "unnatural".³⁴⁴ This very notion testifies to the fact that Cho Ki-ch'ön's style was his own, no matter how one may judge the quality of his writing.

³³⁶ Interview with Chöng Ryul.

³³⁷ Yi Chö-l-ju, *Pig-üi yesurin*, 199. Quoted in Brian Myers, *Han Sör-ya and North Korean Literature*, 88.

³³⁸ Söng Hye-rang, *Tüngnamu chip*, 170-171.

³³⁹ Pak Nam-su, *Chöckch'i 6 nyön pukhan mundan*, 209.

³⁴⁰ Interview with Cho Yurii.

³⁴¹ Interview with Chöng Ryul.

³⁴² Yi Myöng-jae, *Pukhan munhak sajön*, 197.

³⁴³ Interview with Chöng Ryul.

³⁴⁴ Pak Nam-su, *Chöckch'i 6 nyön pukhan mundan*, 79, 86.

Cho's specific manner was already apparent in the first verses he wrote in Pyongyang: "Tumangang" (1946)³⁴⁵ and "Ttang" ("Land") (1946).³⁴⁶ This style found its fullest expression in Cho Ki-ch'ŏn's big poem *Paektusan*, which was then regarded as the first real masterpiece of Korean Communist literature, and brought a wide popularity and fame to its author.³⁴⁷ Still, this work also gave rise to a controversy in Pyongyang's literary world.

Discussions over *Paektusan*

Paektusan, the long epic written in 1947 and published in the *Nodong Sinmun* in 1948, was devoted to the theme of the anti-Japanese guerrilla activity of "Marshal Kim Il Sung" and the Poch'ŏnbo raid of the Korean guerrillas in 1937 – a topic which had always fascinated Cho. The stories about the anti-Japanese guerrillas, sometimes embellished, filtered across the Soviet-Korean border; some exploits of the resistance fighters were occasionally described by the Soviet press. According to Chŏng Ryul, Cho always wanted to write poetry on the Korean anti-Japanese guerrilla movement. Chŏng Ryul recollects that the arrival of the famous Cho Myŏng-hŭi, a Korean nationalist writer, in the Soviet Far East in 1928 especially inspired Cho Ki-ch'ŏn.³⁴⁸ Lylia Yudolevich also mentions in her letters that in his student years Cho wanted to write about Korean partisans. Chŏng Ryul recollects that Cho started to write the above-mentioned poem after talking with a former anti-Japanese guerrilla, Ch'oe Hyŏn. In his poem Cho Ki-ch'ŏn employed a genre defined by his contemporary critics as the "lyrical epic". The very name of the genre sounded peculiar to Korean intellectuals for it meant an improbable mix of (and was obviously influenced by) Maiakovskii's poems.³⁴⁹

Chŏng Ryul recalls some curious moments in the writing of the poem. Cho would sometimes read unfinished parts of the poem to him and on one occasion Chŏng criticized one episode of the epic. One character, "Paektusan", a young partisan exhausted by four days of hunger in a mountain camp, violates the order of Commander Kim and kills a local farmer's cow. "Commander Kim" berates him severely: "This is not a Japanese cow! This is a cow we must save, the cow of a Korean farmer!" When the young partisan realizes the full depth of his moral degradation and prepares himself for immediate death for marauding, Kim Il Sung shows him mercy and orders him to find the victim and compensate him for the damage.³⁵⁰ Chŏng Ryul accused Cho of plagiarism because the same moralizing stories about stolen cows, pigs, and other peasant property, along with righteous commanders protecting the peasants' interests, could be found in a number of Soviet partisan's novels such as Fadeev's *The*

³⁴⁵ Ibid., 79.

³⁴⁶ L.K. Kim, "Poeziia Cho Ki-ch'ŏna", 153.

³⁴⁷ Yi Myŏng-jae, *Pukhan munhak sajŏn*, 503-508.

³⁴⁸ Interview with Chŏng Ryul.

³⁴⁹ L.K. Kim, "Poeziia Cho Ki-ch'ŏna", 167.

³⁵⁰ *Cho Ki-ch'ŏn sŏnjip*, vol.1: 74-84.

Last of Udege, The Devastation and others.³⁵¹ According to Chŏng Ryul, Cho felt embarrassed and convinced his friend that he had never come across these particular episodes in Soviet fiction.³⁵²

Another objection, raised by a Soviet official at the preliminary readings of the epic in the Soviet embassy, has been taken into account. At that meeting, where the poem was read and immediately translated into Russian, an official noticed that Cho constantly called Korea “my native land” (Kor.: Kohyang). His politically motivated pique was expressed immediately: “Comrade Cho was born in the USSR. That is in fact his native land, Korea is not”. This was a serious ideological reprimand, which reminded all of the ambiguous status of the Soviet Koreans. Cho had no choice but to follow the prescription of the all-powerful Soviet Embassy.³⁵³ In the *Paektusan* edition of 1952, Korea is referred to as “the land of the ancestors” (“Chosang-ŭi ttang”).³⁵⁴

The poem is saturated with Soviet allusions, beginning on the very first page. The poem is dedicated to “the glorious Soviet Army that liberated Korea”.³⁵⁵ It is hard to agree with the authors of *Pukhan 50 nyŏnſa* who argued regarding *Paektusan*: “It was in fact asserted that neither the Soviet Union nor the USA liberated Korea, but the heroic anti-Japanese partisans”.³⁵⁶ *Paektusan* was anything but a piece of nationalistic Korean propaganda and Cho Ki-ch’ŏn, being a Soviet officer himself, could not write otherwise.

The public reaction to the poem was mixed. Many young people praised the poem as an exciting breakthrough in Korean literary style. Cho’s approach was indeed new for Korean poetry, and thus attracted public attention. In addition, the obvious Soviet cultural background of the poem attracted many leftist writers who were curious to learn more about the Communist culture. Even Pak Nam-su, hardly an admirer of Cho Ki-ch’ŏn, mentions the public interest created by the poem in his memoirs.³⁵⁷

³⁵¹ A. Fadeev, *Sobranie sochinenii* [Collected Works], Moscow: Pravda, 1987, Vol. 1, 2. Take, for instance, the episode of a peasant’s melons which were stolen by the careless young partisan Morozko in Fadeev’s *Razgrom* [Devastation] (1927). The righteous commander Levinson uses the same tactic as Commander Kim – first, he raises the anger of the guerilla collective towards the criminal. Comrades berate the offender and threaten him with exile or even something worse, causing the young partisan to feel deeply ashamed of himself. Then the commander and comrades show mercy and make a decision to help the peasants, and the victim of the robbery in particular, working together in the fields. See: A. Fadeev, *Razgrom* [Devastation], Moscow: Hudozhestvennaia Literatura, 1972, 44-53.

³⁵² Interview with Chŏng Ryul.

³⁵³ Ibid.

³⁵⁴ *Cho Ki-chŏn sŏnjip*. Vol.1: 10, 29.

³⁵⁵ Cho Ki-chŏn, “Paektusan” [Paektusan], in *Cho Ki-chŏn sŏnjip*, Vol. 1: 6.

³⁵⁶ Yim Yŏng-t’ae, Ko Yu-hwan, *Pukhan 50 nyŏnſa*, Vol. 1: 144.

³⁵⁷ Pak Nam-su, *Chŏkch’i 6 nyŏn pukhan mundan*, 91.

Yet a significant part of the North Korea literary establishment was annoyed by *Paektusan*.³⁵⁸ The subsequent discussion reflected both the political rivalry and a clash of literary tastes. Pak Nam-su and Chŏng Ryul reflect the heated discussions over *Paektusan* from contrary viewpoints. The dispute eventually developed into a confrontation with the critic An Ham-kwan, a member of the rival ex-KAPF faction. This incident deserves special attention.

The formal subject of the polemic between An and Cho was the poem's archaic and exalted style which differed from the customary style of contemporary Korean writers. The frequent use of archaic images and outdated expressions irritated some Korean readers. For example, Cho depicts Kim Il Sung in the following manner:

“O, Kim, you commander of Korean partisans!
The Japanese pirates of Three Provinces tremble when they hear your name!
O, you, ruler of Changpaek!
You hold mountains in your bare hands!
Mysterious rumors spread about your glorious name.
They say you can cross a thousand miles in an instant
Because you know the secret of shrinking the earth to move like lightning!
They say that you, a glorified commander, were born
When Venus had risen in the North,
Above the waves of the Amnokkang, and shone mysteriously over the earth.
O, you, Marshal Kim, you sovereign of Paektusan!”³⁵⁹

This depiction owed much to the contemporary Soviet poetry, in which the portrayal of the Communist leader as a legendary hero of epic proportions had become an established practice. This tendency is particularly traceable particularly in the poetry of the non-Russian republics. There, the regional minstrels of Stalin's cult, such as Dzambul Dzhabaev, Suleiman Stal'sky, Leonidze, etc. used to invent colourful designations for the Great Leader: “hero of the heroes, son of lightening and thunder”, “Stalin who spawns thunderstorms in the sea”, “the hope and light of humanity”, etc.³⁶⁰ These epithets mostly referred to Stalin, but the same elevated mode can be found in the poetic images of Lenin and other lesser Communist leaders, such as Ezhov, for instance.³⁶¹ This particular influence on Cho Ki-ch'ŏn's literary style may be ascribed to the Kazakh poet Dzhabul Dzhabaev, widely known as one of the major and most servile eulogists of the Soviet leaders, who used particularly aggrandized hyperbole and intentional archaisms in his songs. Cho Ki-ch'ŏn lived and worked in Kazakhstan when Dzhabul Dzhabaev was a local celebrity, and his long poems were widely translated

³⁵⁸ Interview with Chŏng Ryul.

³⁵⁹ Cho Ki-ch'ŏn. “Paektusan”, 23-24.

³⁶⁰ G. Cheremnin, *Obraz Stalina v sovetskoi hudozhestvennoi literature* [The Image of Stalin in Soviet Fiction], Moscow: Pravda, 1950.

³⁶¹ There is a very characteristic poem of Dzhabul Dzhabaev about “People's Commissar Ezhov” (1937), where Ezhov, the chief of the NKVD secret police during the “Great Purge” of 1937-1938, is referred to as “a stern sword”, an “eye of the country, which is clearer than a diamond”, etc. (See: <http://cray.onego.ru/~solvio/gostinaya/albom/literatura/ezhov.html>)

and studied across this Soviet republic. Cho himself translated Dzhambul's poetry (from Russian, not from the Kazakh original). The style might have been familiar to Cho Ki-ch'ŏn, brought up in the traditions of Soviet literature, but it appeared quite foreign to many of his Korean colleagues.

On the other hand, Pak Nam-su derided the literary genre of *Paektusan*, which Cho Ki-ch'ŏn defined as "sŏjŏng sŏsasi", or "lyrical epic". Pak insisted that Cho, being non-professional, was simply unable to write properly within the established borders of accepted genres and in order to justify his own inadequacy invented this "eccentric style".³⁶²

The question of the inappropriateness of the poetical form of *Paektusan* was first raised at a discussion of the poem by Korean writers and critics. According to Chŏng Ryul, it was a meeting of Korean writers in the office of Kim Ch'ang-man, the then head of the KWP Central Committee's Department of Propaganda in 1947 or 1948. This department controlled and "guided" the entire cultural life of the country. The meeting began with a reading of *Paektusan*, followed by a discussion. Pak Nam-su recalls that An Ham-gwang, a member of the ex-KAPF faction, sharply criticized the poem. He described the poem's style as "wooden" and "unnatural" and added that he saw no difference between this so-called poem and ordinary prose. An Ham-gwang also mentioned that there was a lack of interesting and engaging protagonists, except for Kim Il Sung, in the epic and concluded that the whole result could be called a fiasco.³⁶³

Chŏng Ryul states that An's attack on the poem took place after Kim Ch'ang-man had praised *Paektusan* in front of other writers. Chŏng Ryul recalls that An Ham-kwan was not the first to compare the poem with prose – *Paektusan*, indeed, did not keep to the traditional rules of Korean versification. Chŏng cites a characteristically sarcastic remark by the prosaic Yu Hang-rim. During a presentation of the poem in 1948 in a restaurant on the banks of the Taedonggang river, Yu proposed a toast to the "good prose of Cho Ki-ch'ŏng", since, he explained, being a prosaic he preferred the non-verse style and felt happy to meet another prosaic colleague.

As Chŏng Ryul notes, the biting remark of Yu, a jester in the North Korean literary world, has been ignored.³⁶⁴ But the assault of An Ham-gwang was different from the usual sarcasm of a colleague, since An Ham-gwang represented the ex-KAPF members, whose faction was determined to fight off its competitors. Hence, his challenge could not go unanswered and the answer was immediately forthcoming. Pak Nam-su recalls how Cho Ki-ch'ŏn retaliated. "You think that the poem is bad, do you? But they read it at the Headquarters of the Soviet Army, in the Council of the People's Commissar of North Korea, in the Labor Party, and everybody said it was good. How dare you contradict such high opinions? You, comrade, are not right. If you are against the opinion of the Headquarters of the Soviet Army, it means you are anti-Soviet. And

³⁶² Pak Nam-su, *Chŏkch'i 6 nyŏn pukhan mundan*, 96.

³⁶³ Ibid., 86.

³⁶⁴ Interview with Chŏng Ryul.

if you are against the Council of the People's Commissar of North Korea, you are anti-government. Moreover, if you are against the opinion of the Labor Party, you are an anti-Party element".³⁶⁵

Pak's quotation may not be completely reliable (Chǒng Ryul, for instance, does not remember this retort by Cho Ki-ch'ŏn), but the core of the conversation and the style of the arguments seem very plausible. The line of argument was typical of the so-called discussions in Soviet literary circles at the time where the real or imaginary support of authorities was decisive. We can encounter this same trend in North Korea, for example, during the discussion over Yi T'ae-jun's novel "The First Fight" ("Ch'ŏt ch'ŏnt'u"). Protecting the novel from the attacks of Han Hyo, another critic of the ex-KAPF faction, "a certain writer" cites the following words of Han Hyo: "had I worked in the department of publishing affairs, this novel would never had been allowed to pass" and proceeds to give a political (or rather demagogic) interpretation of these words: "Does this mean that comrade Han Hyo is not satisfied with the management of the department? It sounds like he is against the Party's opinion".³⁶⁶

Yet no matter how elaborate Cho's polemical skills were, without senior endorsement they would not count for much. At the meeting Cho received strong support from Kim Ch'ang-man who upheld *Paektusan* unconditionally as "a new harvest of North Korean literature"³⁶⁷ and accused An Ham-gwang of acting rudely towards his colleague.³⁶⁸ Both Chǒng Ryul and Pak Nam-su affirm that An's behavior was indeed quite aggressive and arrogant (as we shall see in later chapters, An Ham-gwang was often very rude to his victims). But this was not the main reason behind Kim Ch'ang-man's support. Chǒng Ryul recalls another episode in this discussion. He says that An Ham-kwan called the exalted style of Cho's poem "non-Korean" and "non-national". The aim of these accusations was obvious—An wanted to show that his rival lacked national identity and was a stranger to the authentic Korean culture. To some extent this was true, but the political situation in the country which still remained under Soviet control made such suggestions politically risky. Thus, Kim Ch'ang-man rushed to the rescue of Cho Ki-ch'ŏn and said that the poem's main protagonist Marshal Kim deserved the highest and most exultant style possible. He stressed that Cho used a very appropriate style to depict the Korean leader and his lofty deeds, thus establishing a new tradition that the other Korean writers should follow and emulate. Kim Ch'ang-man, a loyal acolyte of Kim Il Sung, knew how to please his boss and, being no admirer of Moscow himself, he also understood that it was not a good time to alienate North Korea's Soviet sponsors and supervisors. He was fully aware that Kim Il Sung, being the protagonist in the poem, was quite impressed by *Paektusan*. The future "Sun of the Nation" seemed embarrassed by neither its style nor the lofty epithets with which it addressed him. After Kim Il Sung read the poem, he made Cho Ki-ch'ŏn one

³⁶⁵ Pak Nam-su, *Chǒkch'i 6 nyŏn pukhan mundan*, 87.

³⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 117.

³⁶⁷ Sin Hyǒng-gi and O Sǒng-ho, *Pukhan munhaksa*, 29.

³⁶⁸ Pak Nam-su, *Chǒkch'i 6 nyŏn pukhan mundan*, p.87

of his personal friends and even began to visit the poet's home.³⁶⁹ Soon after the discussion An Ham-gwang lost his important official positions, including the post of first secretary of the NKFLA and only the intercession of Han Sŏr-ya and Yi Ki-yŏng (both fellow ex-KAPF cadres) helped him later to be restored to the post of chairman of the Writers' Union and an editor of "Literature and Art", the organ of the NKFLA.³⁷⁰

After this discussion and the subsequent official endorsement of the poem, the standing of *Paektusan* and its author became unshakable. The poem was announced as a "new classic", an exemplary work to be studied and emulated. Bryan Myers mentions that in 1947 the author received the first Festival Prize for the poem.³⁷¹ According to Soviet sources, Cho received this prize in 1948.³⁷² The latter date sounds more convincing since *Paektusan* was first published in 1948 in *Nodong sinmun*. The poem was later staged at the State Theatre by dramatist Han T'ae-ch'ŏn, and Kim Il Sung personally approved the performance.³⁷³

Nevertheless, the brief debate over the poem was an crucial event. It stands as an early example of the ideological campaigns that tore apart the North Korean literary world in the years 1953-1960. The arguments opponents used in 1948, while not causing the same devastating effects, were still of quite a demagogic nature. The participants resorted to political accusation: An Ham-gwang accused his competitor of using "non Korean" and "non-national" motives while Cho Ki-ch'ŏn in turn accused his opponent of harboring "anti-Party", "anti-government" and "anti-Soviet" sentiments. Kim Ch'ang-man in turn hinted that An did not show enough deference to Marshal Kim, and so on.

Paektusan brought not only new form, but also new images into the North Korean literary tradition. Kim Il Sung, for instance, was depicted in accordance with the established Soviet patterns. Like Stalin in the contemporary Soviet literature, Kim is pictured vigilant at night while ordinary partisans rested serenely. Stern and authoritative, Kim Il Sung took his wisdom and encouragement from books about the heroic deeds of Soviet partisans.³⁷⁴ All these traits meanwhile reflected the actual behavior of Stalin who indeed suffered from insomnia and was an avid reader. But they did not reflect Kim Il Sung's character. Kim was much younger and was never particularly fond of books. The manner in which Cho Ki-ch'ŏn depicted the North Korean leader accommodated the aesthetic standards of the new socialist world which were designed to be a replica of the Soviet system. Cho Ki-ch'ŏn in fact worshiped Kim Il Sung as a national hero and portrayed him with genuine veneration. Yet he depicted Kim as a "Korean Stalin" who acted bravely and skillfully, but always under the wise protective shadow of the "big Stalin" in Moscow.

³⁶⁹ Interview with Cho Yurii.

³⁷⁰ Yi Myŏn-jae, *Pukhan munhak sajŏn*, 762.

³⁷¹ Brian Myers, *Han Sŏr-ya and North Korean literature*, 51.

³⁷² L.K.Kim, "Poeziia Cho Ki'ch'ŏna", 147.

³⁷³ Interview with Chŏng Ryul.

³⁷⁴ Cho Ki-ch'ŏn, "Paektusan", 3-153.

The image of Kim Il Sung produced by Cho Ki-ch'ŏn played a meaningful artistic role, inspiring the numerous eulogists of the North Korean leader to depict him as an intelligent, persistent, and unbending hero. Nevertheless, this initial approach was gradually modified by the new image created by Han Sŏr-ya, Hŏng Sun-ch'ŏl, and the other ex-KAPF members. Their portrayal of Kim Il Sung as a naïve, spontaneous, passive figure, endowed with slightly feminine traits, has been perceptively analyzed by Brian Myers in his book on Han Sŏr-ya.³⁷⁵ In the words of Chŏng Ryul, the Soviet Koreans working at the time in Pyongyang were indignant at the newly emerging image of the Korean leader. For them, it appeared almost comical and disrespectful.³⁷⁶

Cho Ki-ch'ŏn after Paektusan: “proletarian poet” or “hidden lyricist?”

Between 1945 and 1950 Cho Ki-ch'ŏn composed a number of poems: “Tumangang” (1946) about the suffering of Koreans under the Japanese colonial rule, “Uri-ŭi kil” (“Our way”) (1949) which glorified the Soviet-Korean friendship and “Hangjaeng-ŭi yŏsu” (“Resistance in Yosŭ”) (1950) about the South Korean communist underground, among others.³⁷⁷

All of these works were praised as pioneering and exemplary. So too was the lyrical epic “Ttang” (“Land”), written in response to the Party’s order to extol the recent land reform of 1946. For most North Korean writers such demands were something new and strange, and they felt perplexed and bewildered. But Cho, equipped with his Soviet experience, immediately produced the required work.³⁷⁸ These propaganda poems were far from being literary masterpieces but still they were the beginning of a new literary tradition that Cho strove to establish in Korea. For this reason he ignored the frequent ridicule which native Korean writers poured on the genre that Cho Ki-ch'ŏn chose for the poem – the “lyrical epic” (Kor: sŏjŏng sŏsasi). According to Pak Nam-su, Korean writers, accustomed to either “lyrical” or “epic” poems, found it absurd to mix these seemingly different styles in the one poem. But Cho, brought up in a more diverse literary tradition, stubbornly held his line.³⁷⁹

Fulfilling the Party’s order to “immerse [oneself] in the masses”, Cho Ki-ch'ŏn traveled around the country visiting farms and factories. In the summer of 1949 he went to the Hamhŭng plant where he “participated in the assembly of tools and machines and acquainted himself intimately with work and the everyday life of the workers”.³⁸⁰ This was yet another exemplary action since many Korean authors “immersed themselves in the masses” rather reluctantly. Han Sŏr-ya, for instance, spent “just one day in the

³⁷⁵ Brian Myers, *Han Sŏr-ya and North Korean Literature*, 135-142.

³⁷⁶ Interview with Chŏng Ryul.

³⁷⁷ Yi Myŏng-jae, *Pukhan munhak sajŏn*, 942-943.

³⁷⁸ Pak Nam-su, *Chŏkch'i 6 nyŏn pukhan mundan*, 59-60.

³⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 60.

³⁸⁰ L.K. Kim, “Poeziia Cho Ki-ch'ŏna”, 147.

industrial zone of Sadong. He did not seek contacts with the workers, choosing instead to join students of the local engineering school on a class excursion to an adjacent mine”.³⁸¹

As a result of those trips, Cho Ki-ch’ŏn wrote poems glorifying socialist construction and industrialization. Some representative lines from Cho’s long epic “Saengea-ŭi Norae” (“The Song of Life”) (June, 1950), written after his visit to the Hamhŭng plant illustrate the style of these writings:³⁸²

“Steelworker Kim Yŏng-su is coming to the plant,
(...)
Smoke billows in front of him,
The smoke is colored by the morning sunshine.
It is the proud smoke of reconstruction.
A creative energy is blazing there
Pounding hearts,
Hot breath,
Developing muscles,
The fire of patriotism is blazing there.
It is the proud smoke of success.”³⁸³

The poem tells about the struggle of progressive workers striving to fulfill the production plan ahead of schedule. Needless to say, they have to overcome sabotage by “class enemies” – a very common topic in Stalinist fiction. The backward worker Tŏk-po is manipulated by a vicious former landlord and destroys the electric furnace in order to outstrip the opposing brigade in socialist competition. At the end of the poem Tŏk-po “unbends his crushed soul”,³⁸⁴ regrets his unforgivable behavior, and is rectified.

Like *Paektusan*, “The Song of Life” and other works by Cho were saturated with exalted intonation and hyperbolic images that were indeed reminiscent of Maiakovskii, and at the same time were quite foreign to the Korean literary tradition. The alien intonation could not help but estrange Cho from the more conservative authors. Pak Nam-su also mentions other exotic traits of Cho Ki-ch’ŏn, such as his steady manner of speaking, his unusual “Soviet” manner of declaring verse with his head tilted backwards etc.³⁸⁵ The ideological background of Cho Ki-ch’ŏn’s poems, his open obsequiousness to Kim Il Sung, and his panegyrics to the Red Army, especially irritated Pak Nam-su. Pak wrote with indignation that the explicit propagandistic motif of Cho Ki-ch’ŏn’s verses “never embarrassed” the poet who, repeating his famous Soviet dictum, insisted that “literature must be national in form and democratic (read

³⁸¹ Brian Myers, *Han Sŏr-ya and North Korean Literature*, 44,54.

³⁸² *Cho Ki-ch’ŏn sŏnjip*, Vol.1: 153-360.

³⁸³ *Ibid.*, 161-163.

³⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 235.

³⁸⁵ Pak Nam-su, *Chŏkch’i 6 nyŏn pukhan mundan*, 78.

Communist) in content”.³⁸⁶ However, Pak’s righteous exasperation can be taken at face value only if we choose to ignore the North Korean biography of Pak Nam-su himself. Like most of Cho’s critics and factional rivals, Pak once wrote verse on the same topics and with similar political fervor, but for some reason with less success.

There are important remarks in Pak Nam-su’s memoirs regarding Cho Ki-ch’ön’s perception by the local Korean writers. Pak reports that the native writers were shocked by Cho’s negative view of Dostoevskii, a traditional icon of Korean intellectuals. According to Pak, at the meetings with the Korean writers Cho Ki-ch’ön, in answer to a question by a member of the public, described the famous Russian novelist as a “reactionary”.³⁸⁷ This is no surprise since Cho’s response was in accordance with the official Stalinist view of Dostoevskii. At the same time Pak Nam-su points to the high intellectual level of Cho Ki-ch’ön’s public speeches and of his substantial knowledge of contemporary Soviet and foreign literature. Pak noticed that the Korean writers listened to Cho with great attention. “Everything he said was so exiting and interesting; he seemed like a visitor from some strange and mystical place. He gave the impression of being a very erudite person”.³⁸⁸

The perception of Cho Ki-ch’ön as erudite by local Koreans was not accidental. Most of his audience consisted of leftist intellectuals who, before Liberation, gravitated towards the KAPF and other pro-Communist organizations. Although the general educational level of these people was above that of the average Korean, it was still quite low. In contrast to the early Russian Bolsheviks and their supporters, often graduates of the best universities, most Korean leftist writers attended Japanese universities only briefly, and left them in the first or second year without completing their courses. Their education thus tended to be rather superficial and fragmentary.³⁸⁹ It is no wonder then that Cho Ki-ch’ön, who had received a profound philological education in two languages, became somewhat of an authority figure.

Cho Ki-ch’ön’s works were permeated by politics and ideology, while lyrical themes were rare and secondary. It is also noteworthy that the descriptions of landscapes or romantic relationships in Cho Ki-ch’ön’s poems are always supposed to convey some propagandistic message; nature approves or disapproves of the protagonists’ actions which are essentially political. Depending on the situation, mountains and rivers “cry” or “laugh”. One could refer to Cho’s poem “Hũin Paue Anjaso” (“Sitting on the White Rock”), written on July 1947 in the Kũmgansan People’s resort, for example.³⁹⁰ The protagonist is sitting on a white rock above a fast-flowing spring and “talking with the water”. At first glance this is a bucolic picture, quite common and in tune with the Korean literary tradition. But we come to realize almost immediately that the protagonist is not simply enjoying his leisure. He puts his

³⁸⁶ Ibid., 81, 84.

³⁸⁷ Ibid., 81.

³⁸⁸ Ibid., 83.

³⁸⁹ Brian Myers, *Han Sŏr-ya and North Korean Literature*, 20, interview with Chŏng Ryul.

³⁹⁰ *Cho Ki-chŏn sŏnjip*, Vol. 2: 52-54.

time to excellent use honoring his revolutionary spirit since he is learning to be as swift and tenacious as the flowing water and intends to break his enemies into pieces.

The love relationships in “Saengae-ŭi” norae serve as another example of this tendency. According to the Stalinist tradition, love is supposed to help the heroes fulfill production plans and fight enemies more successfully. Look at the way the author describes the passion of the two protagonists, the advanced workers Kŭm-sun and Yŏng-su.

“It is not just a “sweet love”,
Which poets eulogize in their “songs of passion”.
It is a relationship where both lovers stand hand in hand
For the construction of democracy,
For the creation of the Motherland.
It is a exalted love of the new Korea and one which we must applaud.
(...)
Love is not about a supple bosom or starry eyes.
Exalted love is a fight for the spring of a free Korea.”³⁹¹

This notion is strongly reminiscent of the early Soviet philosophy of love, reflected in the famous poems of Maiakovskii, such as “A Letter to Comrade Kostrov from Paris on the Essence of Love” (1929) (“To love does not mean simply to boil with passion. Love leaps over the mountains of bosoms and jungles of hair. To love means to rush into the backyard and chop the wood for the fire with the spackling axe enjoying your strength”) or “A Letter to Tatiana Yakovleva” (1929) (“The red color of my republics must shine even in my kissing, and hugging, and the trembling of the body that I love”).³⁹²

As we have mentioned above, Cho’s once indisputable reputation as a ‘proletarian poet’ has recently begun to fade in South Korean scholarship. He is increasingly perceived as the author of lyrical, seemingly non-political poems such as “Hŭip’aram” (“Whistle”), “Suyang pŏtŭl” (“Willow”), or “Kŭne” (“Swing”), which became the texts of songs, popular among leftist students in the South. This approach is even reflected in the titles of recent South Korean publications about the poet (“The poet of the Whistle” etc³⁹³). Some South Korean scholars have used these verses as grounds for asserting that the ‘real’ Cho Ki-ch’ŏn was not a political ‘proletarian poet’ at all, but a soft lyricist who has to be ‘re-discovered’ today.

In the light of today’s rapprochement between South and North Korea, the desire of South Korean intellectuals to find allies among former enemies and for this reason to “domesticate” Cho Ki-ch’ŏn’s legacy is understandable. However, this “re-discovery” should not be done at the price of a distortion of facts, which is often the case. In fact,

³⁹¹ *Cho Ki-ch’ŏn sŏnjip*, Vol. 1: 308-309.

³⁹² Vladimir Maiakovskii, “Pis’mo tovarishchu Kostrovu o sushchnosti liubvi” [A Letter to Comrade Kostrov from Paris About the Essence of Love], “Pis’mo Tatianie Iakovlevoi” [A Letter to Tatiana Yakovleva], in *Sobranie sochinenii* [Collected works], Moscow: Pravda, 1973, Vol. 6: 150-157.

³⁹³ Yi Ch’ang-ju, “Puk-ŭi huip’aram siin Cho Ki-ch’ŏn”, 21.

neither “Whistle”, nor “Swing” contradicts the conventional image of Cho Ki-ch’ôn as an overtly politicized “Communist poet”. Both Chông Ryul and Pak Nam-su (i.e. both friend and foe) perceive Cho’s lyrical poems, not as a protest against official ideology, but as reflections of particular tendencies in the Korean literature of the period.

Pak Nam-su represents Cho’s “Whistle” and “Swing” as the emulation of the lyrical poems written by the Soviet poet Isakovskii (1900-1973) who was very popular at the time in the USSR and widely translated in other Communist countries. According to Pak, the “quick-witted” Cho Ki-ch’ôn sensed a new social trend and rushed to use it. It was approximately at this time that the Soviet poet Grinachev came to Korea and wondered why Korean poets wrote only about politics and did not extol such eternal objects as, say, the moon or flowers. This opinion led to a wave of lyrical poems in Korea in 1947-48, such as “The First Snow” by Kim Sang-o, “Pine Tree” by Kim Sun-sök, and others.³⁹⁴

Chông Ryul generally agrees with such a perception. At first Korean writers wrote only “political” verse since they believed that socialist realist literature must be rigid and overtly ideological. According to Chông the situation changed slightly after a group of Russian artists came to Korea and began to sing Russian romances in front of their Korean hosts. Chông Ryul recollects this performance as a shock to many Korean intellectuals. At the time many of them came to their Soviet Korean colleagues and asked: “Is it permitted to sing such sweet love songs in a Communist country?” The Soviet Koreans laughed and explained that love songs were an important part of Russian culture and that a lot of new poems and songs on romantic themes were being created in the Soviet Union every day. Taking this as a green light, Korean intellectuals such as Min Pyôn-gyun, Kim Cho-gyu, Pak Se-yông and others started to produce lyrical poems in abundance. In addition, translations of many Soviet lyrical verses appeared in Korea at this time as well. Some of these, such as Isakovskii’s “Katyusha”, Simonov’s “Wait for Me” etc., have become especially popular as the lyrics of pop-songs. All these events changed the atmosphere in Pyongyang literary circles, rendering North Korean poetry more tender and eminently more readable.³⁹⁵ However, they had nothing to do with resistance to the regime. On the contrary, this was just another manifestation of their eagerness to follow the line, which at that time meant the closest possible imitation of the current Moscow trends.

And, of course, we should not overestimate the degree of political freedom expressed in these verses. Cho Ki-ch’ôn’s lyrical poems were anything but a concession to “pure art” like the essay of the director of Pukpang yôngusö (Research institute on North Korea), Yi Ch’ang-ju³⁹⁶ and the above-mentioned article in *Hanguk ilbo* asserted.³⁹⁷ Like the verses of Isakovskii, with which they have a lot of textual similarities, Cho’s love songs faithfully reflect the current political demands. For

³⁹⁴ Pak Nam-su, *Chôkch’i 6 nyôn pukhan mundan*, 129-130.

³⁹⁵ Interview with Chông Ryul.

³⁹⁶ Yi Ch’ang-ju, “Puk-úi huip’aram siin Cho Ki-ch’ôn”, 21.

³⁹⁷ “Cho Ki-ch’ôn chaejomyông”, 4.

instance, the protagonists of “Whistle” are not ordinary sweethearts but exemplary workers who, needless to say, over-fulfill labor norms threefold and stay up late every night looking through study materials.³⁹⁸

“Today you again smiled purely,
And said that you have over- fulfilled the production plan threefold,
But I do not envy your achievement,
I can do even better,
But I like your smile.
Why is it so pure?”³⁹⁹

The poem “Swing” depicts the spring folk festival Tano and the traditional entertainment of Korean girls being lifted up on a swing. But even this idyllic picture is saturated with propaganda. One of the swinging girls dreams of a distant Pyongyang where the national flag is waving in the wind and of Kim Il Sung University, where her boyfriend, yesterday’s farmhand, is now studying.⁴⁰⁰ The poem “Willow” is less politicized. It depicts a beautiful spring morning, the young willow growing up under the window of the young protagonist and the rejuvenating mood he feels on watching the growing tree. But the author does not fail to notice that the spring mood is fruitful, since it fills the hero with a new invigorating strength, which, of course, helps him work productively all day.⁴⁰¹

These poems vividly remind one of Isakovskii whose verses always described the “useful” relationships of “good”, “advanced” boys and girls.⁴⁰² Cho Ki-ch’ŏn borrowed not only the form of Isakovskii’s poems, but also used the imagery of his verses, and this is one of the possible reasons why nowadays South Korean readers often misunderstand the message of Cho’s poems. For instance, in recent Seoul newspaper articles “Whistle” is described as “a song of unrequited love”⁴⁰³ while the truth is precisely to the contrary: both protagonists are in love and the girl invitingly smiles at the boy, but he is too shy to open his heart. He simply sighs secretly, which in Korean eyes probably represents a picture of unhappy love. The very images of the poem point

³⁹⁸ *Cho Ki-ch’ŏn sŏnjip*, Vol.2: 69.

³⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 70.

⁴⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 49; L.K. Kim, “Poeziia Cho Ki-ch’ŏna”, 154.

⁴⁰¹ *Cho Ki-ch’ŏn sŏnjip*, Vol. 2: 47.

⁴⁰² See, for instance, the poem of Mikhail Isakovskii “Ya ne klala v pechku drov” [I Did not Put Wood into the Stove”] (1927). The poem is about a girl’s separation from her boyfriend. The girl who initiates the break-up explains that “it is more fun to love a teacher” rather than waste time “lazily singing songs”. (See Mihail Isakovskii, *Stihi, poemy i pesni* [Verses, Poems and Songs], Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe isdatel’stvo hudozhestvennoi literatury, 1951, Vol.1: 74-75). The protagonist of the famous song *Katyusha*, a young girl, is waiting for her boyfriend while he is serving in the army “far away”. Not surprisingly, the boy is not a simple country lad but an advanced frontier-guard, who is protecting the great Soviet land while Katyusha is “guarding their love” (See: *Ibid.*, 217).

⁴⁰³ See, for instance, the article “Chchaksarang naeyong-ŭi ch’oedae hit’ŭ kok Hŭi p’aram” [The Great Hit “Whistle”, a Song of Unrequited Love], *Chungang ilbo*, 15 January 1995, 17.

to their derivation from a popular Soviet song, with lyrics by Isakovskii “At Sunset I See a Boy Near My House” (“At sunset I see a boy near my house. He just sighs and does not say a word. And I don’t know why he sighs”).⁴⁰⁴ Like Isakovskii, Cho depicts his female protagonist as a resolute and active figure in contrast to the timid boy. Both characters act in accordance with the Russian, not Korean, code of behavior, which might mislead Korean readers.

Thus the ideological constituent of Cho Ki-ch’ŏn’s lyrical poems is undeniable. It has to be mentioned, however, that the inseparable political component of Cho’s lyrical songs did not prevent them from being popular among the Korean public. The assertion of the South Korean *Taehan maeil* newspaper that since North Korean art is strictly politicized “there are no popular songs in North Korea”, sounds over-simplistic.⁴⁰⁵ There definitely are popular songs in North Korea, and TV singer contests remain a favorite entertainment among North Korean audiences. The North Korean public, as the Soviet one before, simply manages to ignore the political content of a lyrical song and enjoy it as it is.⁴⁰⁶

Cho Ki-ch’ŏn during the Korean War

On the 25th of June, 1950 the North Korean army invaded the South. Soon after the outbreak of war, Cho sent his family to Moscow while remaining in Pyongyang himself. The Soviet writer Chakovskii, cited in an article by L.K.Kim, claims that “from the beginning of the Korean War Cho rushed to fight, but was not allowed. He was needed in Pyongyang. The fighting people of Korea wanted his poetic voice, transmitted by radio and newspapers. But Cho eventually got his way and went to the front. So, for the first half of his journey he traveled as a civilian, and for the second half as an officer of the People’s Army”.⁴⁰⁷ We can find similar claims in some North Korean materials, such as a memorial article on Cho Ki-ch’ŏn in *Munhak yesul*, #7, 1953. The article affirms that the poet “died, heroically fighting for the freedom and independence of Korea”.⁴⁰⁸ In the second volume of *Cho Ki-ch’ŏn sŏnjip* (“Cho Ki-

⁴⁰⁴ Mihail Isakovskii, “Na zakate hodit paren” [At Sunset I See a Boy Near My House], in *Stihi, poemy i pesni*, Vol.1: 215-216.

⁴⁰⁵ “Ch’oegŭn yuhaeng taejung kayo ōttŏnge inna” [Which Modern Pop Songs Exist (in North Korea)?], *Taehan maeil*, 23 January 1995, 13.

⁴⁰⁶ Probably the best example is the popular Soviet song “Lullaby” with words written by Isakovskii in 1940. Several generations of Russian mothers have sung it to rock their babies to sleep and still enjoy it. It is not widely known, however, that the last lines of Isakovskii’s *Lullaby* are actually: “Sleep, my baby. Stalin will give you strength and show your way with his hand” (See Mihail Isakovskii, “Kolybel’naia” [Lullaby], in *Stihi, poemy i pesni* [Verses, poems and songs], Vol.1: 241). Russians simply chose to forget the initial “political content” of the song and dropped the final, politically charged, lines.

⁴⁰⁷ L.K. Kim, “Poeziia Cho Ki-ch’ŏna”, 147.

⁴⁰⁸ “Aeguk siin ko Cho Ki-ch’ŏn-ŭl ch’umohayŏ yugo ‘pihaenggi sanyangkkun-ŭl’ naemyŏnsŏ” [In Memory of the Late Cho Ki-ch’ŏn, the Patriotic Poet: His Unpublished Poem “Enemy Plane Hunters”], *Munhak yesul*, #7, 1953, 78.

ch'ŏn's Anthology") published in 1953 there is a remark that the poem "Korean Mother" was written in September 1950 in his "frontline notebook",⁴⁰⁹ which implies that the author was in the fighting line while writing the poem. The above-cited North Korean author of Cho's biography Yi Ch'ŏng-gu also states explicitly that Cho engaged directly in the fighting. According to his testimony, when the Korean War started, "Cho Ki-ch'ŏn, who had always fought against American imperialism and reactionaries, wore the Army uniform and went to the front line on the Naktongan river in August 1950".⁴¹⁰ The recently published KCNA articles confirm that this same version of Cho Ki-ch'ŏn's activities is still officially upheld in Pyongyang. In the article "Famous Korean Poet" we find the following statement: "Cho Ki-ch'ŏn wrote his wartime poems while following the army during the Korean war, encouraging all the soldiers of the Korean People's Army to win".⁴¹¹

Some recent South Korean publications also imply that Cho Ki-ch'ŏn met a heroic death on the front line. We can refer for instance to an article published in 1999 in *Hanguk ilbo*.⁴¹² The South Korean journalist here is probably uncritically relying on North Korean sources.

It is noteworthy that the North Korean authors do not specify either the exact place of combat in which Cho Ki-ch'ŏn allegedly took part or his military duties. Such information would not be concealed for security reasons, since the movements of Korean War front correspondents, such as Kim Sa-ryang, were widely reported in the North Korean media.⁴¹³ None of the experts who affirm Cho Ki-ch'ŏn's frontline activity are able to explain why the allegedly fighting poet indeed died in his Pyongyang office on the 31st of July, 1951.⁴¹⁴ The information was probably intended to embellish Cho Ki-ch'ŏn's image, yet is not corroborated by factual materials.

Chŏng Ryul and Cho Yuri both deny Cho's involvement in any military activity during the War.

Chŏng Ryul claims that Cho spent the war in Pyongyang continuing his administrative duties, which included Cho's work in the *Nodong Sinmun* daily, and in the Korean Federation of Literature and Art, KFLA, whose vice-president he became in March of 1951.⁴¹⁵ Cho was also producing new verse, such as "Chosŏnŭn Ssaunda" ("Korea is Fighting") (February 1951), "Chosŏn-ŭi ōmŏni" ("Korean Mother") (September 1950), "Pult'anŭn Kŏriesŏ" ("On the Burning Street") (August 1950), "Na-ŭi koji" ("My Heights") (June 1951), "Urinŭn Chosŏn Ch'ŏngnyŏnida" ("We are

⁴⁰⁹ *Cho Ki-ch'ŏn sŏnjip*, Vol.2: 95.

⁴¹⁰ Yi Ch'ŏng-gu, *Siin Cho Ki-ch'ŏnron*, 12.

⁴¹¹ "Famous Korean poet" distributed by KCNA. 5 July, 2001.

⁴¹² Ko Ŭn "Koŭnŭi si" [The Poems of Ko Ŭn], *Hankuk ilbo*, 24 August, 1999, 33.

⁴¹³ Kim Sa-ryang, "Zapiski voennogo korrespondenta" [Notes of a War Correspondent], in *Koreia boretsia* [Korea is Struggling], Moscow: Isdatelstvo inostranoi literatury, 1952, 137-150; Brian Myers, *Han Sŏr-ya and North Korean Literature*, 73.

⁴¹⁴ "Famous Korean Poet" distributed by the KCNA. 05 July, 2001.

⁴¹⁵ L.K.Kim, "Poeziia Cho Ki-ch'ŏna", 147.

Korean Youth”) (April 1951), “Chugŏmŭn Wŏnsu-ege” (“Death to the Enemies”) (December 1950), “Ch’ŏtsaebŏk-ŭl Matmyonsŏ” (“Greeting the New Dawn”) (1950 New Year’s Eve), “Nunkil” (“Snowy Path”) (January 1951), and “Pomnorae” (“Spring Song”) (February 1951), among others.⁴¹⁶ All these poems are essentially wartime propaganda, obviously meant to encourage North Korean soldiers; they are permeated with fervent patriotic rhetoric and preach righteous hatred against the enemies. In accordance with the general political line, Cho Ki-ch’ŏn represents the Korean War as a heroic fight by the entire Korean people against the nasty American occupants, as essentially a “National Liberation” struggle. The life of antebellum North Korea is depicted as a cloudless bliss. Here is how he describes it in “We are Korean Youth”:

“We did not do a chore without a song
We did not start a day without a smile.
We stayed wide awake on spring nights,
Thinking about newly flourishing flowers,
All inside our beautiful dreams”.⁴¹⁷

Cho Ki-ch’ŏn contrasted this paradise, full of flowers, love, and cheers, with today’s tragedy of Pyongyang, comparing the nightmarish American beasts with virtuous Korean patriots. It is a telltale sign that the enemies in his wartime poems are invariably Americans, sadistic “Yankees”. Their local South Korean allies never make an appearance. Like the previous verses of Cho Ki-ch’ŏn, his wartime poems are full of hyperbole, exaltation and images of blood-thirsty enemies who are shown as the embodiment of cruelty and evil incarnate.⁴¹⁸

“A child who lost his mother,
A child who is crawling along the street in tears,
Both children were pierced
With a hundred bullets
Which were targeted at them
By the blood-loving Yankees!
[...]
The animals were laughing madly
While poking people’s eyes out and tearing out their nails!
The animals carved [pictures of] atomic bombs
With their bayonets on people’s chests!”⁴¹⁹

In 1950-1951 Cho Ki-ch’ŏn remained very prominent in the official circles of the Pyongyang bureaucracy. In a letter to his wife he mentions that he is very busy “checking the innumerable works of other writers”.⁴²⁰ For his “special services to the country” in 1951 he was decorated with the Order of the State Banner in the second

⁴¹⁶ *Cho Ki-ch’ŏn sŏnjip* Vol. 2.

⁴¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 137.

⁴¹⁸ L.K. Kim, “Poeziia Cho Ki-ch’ŏna”, 162.

⁴¹⁹ *Cho Ki-ch’ŏn sŏnjip*. Vol. 2: 132-133.

⁴²⁰ The last letter of Cho Ki-ch’ŏn to his wife, kept in the family archive. Copy of the letter is now in the author’s personal archive.

degree.⁴²¹ In March of 1951 he became a vice-chairman of the KFLA.⁴²² In spite of the assertion of Professor Yi Ch'ang-ju that Cho accepted this appointment unwillingly, for "he had no choice",⁴²³ the new senior post made Cho Ki-ch'ŏn very proud and happy. In a letter to his family in Moscow Cho wrote: "Now I am working in the Korean Federation of Literature and Art as a vice-chairman. KFLA is a very influential organization, which determines the artistic life of all Korea. I had to take that position because the resolution on my assignment came from the very Central Committee of the Party. My responsibilities are very complex, but interesting. This is just the work for me!" [...] "You love my verse and can imagine what a high position I will gain in the future!" [...] "Every day when I return home from the KFLA office they send me a car. This is because I have a lot of work and have made a huge amount of progress".

Cho's excitement about his new appointment is obvious here. As for the phrase "I had to take the position because it was the Central Committee's resolution", which caused Yi Ch'ang-ju to assert that the assignment ran contrary to Cho Ki-ch'ŏn's desire, we might cite the comments of Cho Yurii, the poet's son. According to him, Cho Ki-ch'ŏn here found it necessary to console his wife Kim Hae-sŏn, who was always anxious that her husband did not receive the distinction he supposedly deserved as the leading poet of North Korea. For that reason Cho Ki-ch'ŏn explained his new additional responsibilities as an honorable burden hailing from the highest reaches of power. The rather strange reference to the car, which they allegedly sent him at the Federation has the same roots. Cho Yurii recollects that his ambitious mother used to worry about her husband who instead of riding in his own personal car had to walk like an ordinary mortal. Yurii even supposes his father could have invented the fact about the car to comfort his wife.⁴²⁴

Neither Cho Yurii nor Chŏng Ryul had doubts that Cho Ki-ch'ŏn was very pleased by his promotion. Both informants dispute the above-noted opinion of the alleged conflict between Cho Ki-ch'ŏn and the North Korean regime, and Cho's desire to escape. The grounds for this dubious assertion come from the above-cited final letter of Cho Ki-ch'ŏn, which, according to Yi Ch'ang-ju's reading "was filled with repugnance towards the North Korean system".⁴²⁵ This interpretation leans on one particular part of the letter, which constitutes the following direction to Kim Hae-sŏn: "Do not live in the Korean embassy again. Try to get an apartment through the Soviet Writer's Union. Do not bother the Korean embassy". Yi Ch'ang-ju reads this phrase as a hint of distrust towards North Korean officialdom. Adding this to Cho's alleged unwillingness to fulfill the duties of vice-chairman of KFLA, Yi drew a conclusion of Cho Ki-ch'ŏn's secret hostility towards the North Korean regime. However, Cho Yurii is sure that the prohibition on living in the Korean embassy, which Cho advised his

⁴²¹ L.K. Kim, "Poesiia Cho Ki-ch'ŏna", 147.

⁴²² Ibid., 147

⁴²³ Yi Chang-ju, "Puk-ŭi hui p'aram siin Cho Ki-ch'ŏn", 21.

⁴²⁴ Interview with Cho Yurii.

⁴²⁵ Yi Ch'ang-ju, "Puk-ŭi huip'aram siin Chi Ki-ch'ŏn", 21.

wife, bears a completely different meaning and was connected to an embarrassing family situation.

According to Yuri, his mother Kim Hae-sŏn, a very practical-minded person, when finding herself in Moscow with a child and with no help, acted in a way which Cho Ki-ch'ŏn could never have allowed himself to act: instead of independently trying to find a place to live, she went to the North Korean embassy and loudly demanded they provide her with a house since her husband was at the moment "exhaustedly drudging for Korea". The embassy officials had no choice but to let her live in the embassy for a while. Cho Ki-ch'ŏn judged the situation to be awkward and this is the reason why he asked his wife to seek support not from Korea but the Soviet Writers Union.⁴²⁶

Thus the prohibition on approaching the Korean embassy is explained by the family circumstances and bore no political implications. In the letter there are no credible signs of any alleged "animosity towards the Kim Il Sung dictatorship". In Pyongyang in 1951 the position of Soviet Koreans, and of Cho in particular, was favorable; and Cho Ki-ch'ŏn's personal relationship with the North Korean leader was quite friendly. The only person in Cho's acquaintance who indeed detested Kim Il Sung was the poet's wife, but her negative feelings were explained not by political but by material considerations: Kim Hae-sŏng was sure that the Korean leader, like the other bosses of Cho Ki-ch'ŏn, underestimated her grand husband and did not render him all the rewards she thought he deserved.⁴²⁷

Cho Ki-ch'ŏn was killed on the 31st of July, 1951 by a direct hit from a bomb while he was in his office on the banks of the Taedong-gang river.⁴²⁸ Chŏng Ryul, along with other top officials, attended his funeral in Pyongyang. Thus ended the life of one of the most influential Soviet-Korean figures of the early North Korean literary scene.

Cho Ki-ch'ŏn's legacy

When the Soviet authorities decided to send Cho Ki-ch'ŏn to North Korea in 1945, they hardly anticipated his future role as the founding father of socialist realist poetry in that country. Nonetheless, they expected that Cho, like his fellow Soviet Koreans, would contribute towards the growth of the Soviet influence in the country. Time ultimately proved that he was an ideal choice for this purpose. Though Cho Ki-ch'ŏn himself had experienced the forcible resettlement of Soviet Koreans as well as ethnic discrimination, he obviously did not draw any general political conclusions from this personal encounter with Stalinism. At the very least, any such conclusions he might have drawn failed to influence his literary, administrative, and political activities. Like millions of his contemporaries who were enthusiastic supporters of Stalin, he probably explained the tragedy of the Soviet Koreans as "mistakes" or the shortsightedness of

⁴²⁶ Interview with Cho Yuri.

⁴²⁷ Ibid.

⁴²⁸ Interview with Chŏng Ryul; Yi Myŏng-jae, *Pukhan munhak sajŏn*, 943.

some members of the Great Leader's entourage rather than blame The Father of the Peoples and the Stalinist system as a whole. Being brought up inside the Soviet reality he still perceived Communist ideology as the only correct and progressive way to live, and was eager to share his knowledge with his Korean colleagues. For this reason all his North Korean works are saturated with explicit ideological motifs. Cho's aspiration to follow the examples of Maiakovskii, Isakovskii, and the other official Soviet authors must be explained by his sincere desire to create a new, supposedly "progressive" Korean literature.

Cho Ki-ch'ŏn took up his duties with great success. The ideas, style, and imagery that he first introduced into Korea strongly influenced North Korean literature. Suffice it to mention that his "sŏjŏng sŏsasi" poetry style, once the object of Pak Nam-su's ridicule and attacks has become common in contemporary North Korean poetry.⁴²⁹

His North Korean official career was successful as well. Cho quickly rose to prominence in the Pyongyang literary world and, unlike many fellow Soviet Koreans, did not lose his official recognition after his death. Perhaps, had he survived until the large-scale persecution of the Soviet Koreans in the mid-1950s, his name and his works would have suffered greatly. However, the poet was killed in 1951, well before the relations with Moscow began to deteriorate, and he remained in the official North Korean history as a trusted co-worker of the Great Leader and one of his early eulogizers. The wartime death prevented him from being associated with purged politicians many of whom used to be his close friends and protectors. Cho Ki-ch'ŏn's name is still honored in North Korea. However, in his lifetime the unequivocal support of the Soviet authorities played a major role in his career success. Cho was careful to present *Paektusan* (and perhaps other major works of his) for Soviet approval, and followed the Soviet advice in editing the poem. The powerful Soviet presence also protected him against any attack attempted by the writers from other literary factions. By the time of his death he occupied a high official position and exercised a powerful influence over the North Korean literary world.

Cho Ki-ch'ŏn's activity as a translator of the Soviet experience for North Korea lasted for a mere six years but had far-reaching and ambivalent consequences. In one sense the Soviet cultural influence enriched the Korean intellectual atmosphere. Through the activity of Cho Ki-ch'ŏn and other Soviet Koreans, the North Koreans came to know the Soviet intellectual and cultural tradition that stemmed from its Russian cultural roots but also mingled with diverse cultural traditions of the non-Russian Soviet republics.

However, the potentially positive results of Cho's North Korean activities were eclipsed by the shadow of Stalinist ideology, which at that time shaped Soviet culture and the worldview of Cho Ki-ch'ŏn himself. Cho became one of the first eulogists of the North Korean Great Leader and one of the profound sculptors of the future cult of Kim Il Sung. Cho's literary and administrative activities helped to subjugate the North Korean arts to the contemporary political demands. Cho came from a USSR which saw

⁴²⁹ See, for instance, the above-cited anthology *Yŏngyŏnhan Noŭl* published in Pyongyang in 1998.

the ideal writer as, first and foremost, a political propagandist and loyal interpreter of the current directions of the authorities. He did his best to establish this same perception in Korea as well. Though Cho Ki-ch'ŏn himself had never initiated political campaigns against his competitors, he was in fact one of the first writers to introduce the Stalinist demagoguery into Korean literary circles. His writings, heavily loaded with official rhetoric, also left a lasting impact: the eulogies of the "smoke of construction", "exemplary workers" and, of course, curses of the "wicked Yankees" who "carve pictures of atomic bombs" on their victims' chests still remain in the inventory of North Korean poets.

Cho Ki-ch'ŏn's activity typified the Stalinist literary tradition in its purest form. Unlike other North Korean writers, he had no need to study the Stalinist approach to literature through reading or meetings with Soviet writers. He came to the North as a product of the Soviet Stalinist literature even though his writings were executed exclusively in Korean. Together with the translated Soviet texts, his works were presented as examples to emulate and served as a Stalinist prototype in the North Korean literary culture. The path of other North Korean writers was, however, less straightforward.

YI KI-YŎNG: A SUCCESSFUL LITERARY CADRE

Scholarly perceptions of Yi Ki-yŏng

Before discussing Yi Ki-yŏng and his activity it is necessary to critically re-assess some widely held scholarly assumptions about this writer. While positive references to Yi Ki-yŏng as the “founding father of North Korean fiction”, and, by implication, a great literary talent in the DPRK are not a surprise, it is remarkable how strongly the established position of Yi Ki-yŏng in North Korea influenced the overseas perception of this figure. Many South Korean critics today seem to share the view of Yi Ki-yŏng as a prominent creative talent. *Who's Who In Korean Literature*, the contemporary South Korean English-language encyclopedia which targets a foreign readership, praises Yi's *Native Land (Kohyang)* (1933-1934) as “one of the most outstanding achievements in Korean proletarian literature” and “a fine specimen of a proletarian novel”.⁴³⁰ South Korean critic Chŏng Hye-gyŏng describes Yi's post-Liberation novel *Tumangang* as “a big success in the depiction of an old reality”.⁴³¹ Yi Sang-gyŏng, the author of an extensive research monograph on Yi Ki-yŏng, proclaims the “outstanding literary success” of *Native Land*.⁴³² These tributes might stem from too trusting an approach to the North Korean official perspective on the subject. In my opinion, however, even the model works of Yi Ki-yŏng can hardly be defined as literary masterpieces. All his novels are marked by an apparent lack of originality. Japanese, Russian, Soviet, and, in one case, even Spanish⁴³³ literary patterns constantly emerge in Yi's works, and these influences in fact often border on plagiarism. Even ethnocentric North Korean critics admit that many images in Yi Ki-yŏng's works, and his classic *Native Land* in particular, constitute direct borrowings from Gorky and Sholokhov's novels.⁴³⁴ It is notable that the emulation occurred before Liberation when no one

⁴³⁰ *Who's Who in Korean literature*, published by Korean culture and arts foundation, Seoul: Hollym, 1998, 500-501.

⁴³¹ Chŏng Hye-gyŏng, “Inmin-ŭi sahoejuŭi chŏngch'esŏng kŏnsŏl-kwa 'kosanghan' riŏllijŭm” [Construction of People's Socialism and “High” Realism], in *Nambukhan hyŏndae munhaksa* [History of Contemporary North and South Korean Literature], edited by Choe Tong-ho, Seoul: Nanam ch'ulp'ansa, 1995, 193.

⁴³² Yi Sang-gyŏng, *Yi Ki-yŏng sidae-wa munhak* [Yi Ki-yŏng: His Era and His Literature]. Seoul: P'ulpit', 1994, 6.

⁴³³ Yi Ki-yŏng himself admitted that his *Ingan Suŏp (Human Lesson)* (1936) was written under the strong influence of Cervantes' *Don Quijote*. See V.I. Ivanova, *Li Gien: Zhizn' i tvorchestvo*, 50.

⁴³⁴ As an example of the North Korean critical approach see Pak Chŏng-sik, “Chosŏn-ŭi munhak-e issŏsŏŭi soryŏn munhak-ŭi yŏngnyang”, 424-425. The South Korean case can be represented by the work of Mun Sŏk-u, “Tturŭgenep'ŭ-wa korikki munhak-ŭi kyŏnggu” [Cases

forced the writer to follow the examples of Korea's future "elder brother". Thus, even if Yi deserved applause for his "outstanding achievements", he should not be the first to be praised.⁴³⁵

The monotonous stiffness of the language and images in Yi's fiction and the paucity of psychological penetration which even his most compassionate critics have been compelled to recognize leave further doubt about the artistic value of Yi Ki-yŏng's writings. To borrow the words of the generally sympathetic Kim Sang-sŏn, "Yi Ki-yŏng's writings just pass through you, they don't touch your heart. The story does not move smoothly, it is too coarse".⁴³⁶ Even Soviet critics like Ivanova, Perventsev or Li who were officially required to treat Yi Ki-yŏng positively, acknowledged this weakness in his writings. While they incessantly praise Yi's "proper" Communist worldview, his "progressive characters", his "truthful representation of the people's spirit" and so on, the Soviet critics, while analyzing the formal side of Yi's writings, could not help but make cautious comments such as "overly simplistic", "a strong didactic tendency", "a touch of bucolic sentimentalism", "a certain implausibility", "some superficiality",⁴³⁷ "some schematization",⁴³⁸ "excessive use of folk motives",⁴³⁹ or "excessively detailed" etc.⁴⁴⁰

I would agree with these critical estimations. Indeed, the artistic arsenal of Yi Ki-yŏng is quite meager. Pretty girls in his writings are invariably compared with beautiful flowers, which "open" when happy and "wither" when sad.⁴⁴¹ A reserved and industrious male character predictably resembles an ox, which in Korean is a nickname for a mute workaholic.⁴⁴² The lyrical moods of his protagonists are repeatedly accompanied by a nightingale singing in willow branches on a spring night, an easily recognizable allusion to the classical Korean novel *Story About Ch'unghyang*

of Turgenev and Gorky], in Yi Poyŏng, Chin Sang-pop etc. (ed.), *Hangukmunhak sokŭi segye munhak* [World literature in Korean literature]. Seoul: Kyujanggak, 1998, 312-316.

⁴³⁵ We should not forget, of course, the historical context here. The problem of plagiarism had deep roots in the Korean tradition – in classical Korean literature, for instance, paraphrasing famous Chinese examples was traditionally regarded as a virtue. At the beginning of the 20th century the copying of respected foreign examples was completely justifiable and even welcomed in Korea. By and large, the so-called "new novels" (*sinsosŏl* in Korean) were based on retelling the storylines of contemporary popular Japanese novels with only the protagonists' names changed. (See V.I. Ivanova, *Novaia proza Korei*, 121-133).

⁴³⁶ Kim Sang-sŏn, *Minch'ŏn Yi Ki-yŏng munhak yŏngu* [A Study of Minch'ŏn Yi Ki-yŏng's literature], Seoul: Kukhak charyowŏn, 1999, 4.

⁴³⁷ V.I. Ivanova, *Li Gien: Zhizn' i tvorchestvo*, 22, 31, 71, 80.

⁴³⁸ V.N. Li, *Sotsialisticheskii realizm v koreaiskoi literature* [Socialist Realism in Korean Literature], Tashkent: Fan, 1971, 73.

⁴³⁹ Ibid., 79.

⁴⁴⁰ Li Gien, *Zemlya* [Land], Moscow: Isdatel'stvo inostrannoi literatury, 1953, 10.

⁴⁴¹ Yi Ki-yŏng, *Kohyang* [Native Land], Pyongyang: Chosŏn chakka tongmaeng ch'ulp'ansa, 1955, 77.

⁴⁴² Yi Ki-yŏng, *Ttang* [Land], Pyongyang: Chosŏn chakka tongmaeng ch'ulp'ansa, 1955, 4.

(*Ch'unhyangjŏn*)⁴⁴³, while a frustrated hero predictably struggles with stormy weather.⁴⁴⁴ Often even these dusty clichés are repeated – like, for example, the proverbial Korean contrast between white herons and black crows which can be found in both “Story about Mice” and “Paper Factory Village”.⁴⁴⁵ Instead of defining a hero by some personal feature or particular action, Yi Ki-yŏng often explicitly describes them simplistically as “good” or “bad”. Similarly, he regularly has positive protagonists deliver lengthy righteous speeches in the wooden idiom of the leftist jargon of the day, a trait typical of Yi’s “ideological” works such as “Paper Factory Village”, “Story About Mice” or “Wŏn-bo”.

Notably, until around 1953 even the North Korean critics admitted the aesthetic deficiency of Yi Ki-yŏng’s novels. North Korean critic Han Hyo, while stressing the positive ideological content of the initial KAPF works (which included Yi Ki-yŏng’s writings) frankly acknowledged that it was “a literature of extremely low artistic quality”.⁴⁴⁶ This fact was no secret to Yi Ki-yŏng himself. He candidly admitted the lack of sophistication of his pre-Liberation novels, but justified it because of the pressing historical circumstances, which allegedly made the literary quality of his writings a less significant factor. In one of his later theoretical works “About the Creative Method” (1957), Yi Ki-yŏng explained his attitude during the KAPF era: “We had no time to decorate the handles of our knives when the enemy was fiercely attacking [us]. Our first task was to sharpen the blade so as to strike the enemy in the very heart”.⁴⁴⁷ Yi Ki-yŏng’s inference is quite clear here: he does not care unduly for quality because he considers it to be less important than the political message of a novel. This alleged dilemma was quite common among those KAPF writers who felt obliged to explain away the obvious deficiencies in the quality of their writing.⁴⁴⁸

One might dismiss the conflict between blade and handle, or the content and the form of a literary piece, as rather artificial. It may be argued, for example, that the inclusion of a political message in a literary work does not necessarily mean an automatic disregard for aesthetics – suffice it to mention the international success of such unabashedly political writers as Gorky or Orwell. Yet we must admit that Yi’s

⁴⁴³ Yi Ki-yŏng, *Kohyang*, 80.

⁴⁴⁴ Yi Ki-yŏng, “Kananhan saram” [Poor People], in *Hyŏndae chosŏn munhak sŏnjip* [Anthology of contemporary Korean literature], Pyongyang: Chosŏn chakka tongmaeng ch’ulp’ansa, 1958, Vol 3: 56-58.

⁴⁴⁵ Yi Ki-yŏng, “Chwi iyagi” [Story About Mice], in *Hyŏndae chosŏn munhak sŏnjip* [Anthology of contemporary Korean literature], Pyongyang: Chosŏn chakka tongmaeng ch’ulp’ansa, 1958, Vol 3: 63; “Cheji kongjang ch’ŏn” [Paper Factory Village], in *Hyŏndae chosŏn munhaksŏnjip*, Vol.3: 199.

⁴⁴⁶ Han Hyo, “Sahoejuŭi reallijŭm-kwa chosŏn munhak” [Socialist Realism and Korean Literature], in *Ch’ŏngnyŏntŭl wihan munhakron* [Literary Theory for the Youth], Pyongyang: Minju ch’ŏngnyŏnsa, 1952, 170.

⁴⁴⁷ Quoted in: V.N. Li, *Koreiskaia proletarskaia literatura. Proza 20-30-h godov* [Korean Proletarian Literature. Fiction of the 1920-1930s], Moscow: Akademiia Nauk SSSR, 1967, 11

⁴⁴⁸ Brian Myers, *Han Sŏr-ya and North Korean Literature*, 27, 32.

readership perceived his writings in much the same manner as he so colourfully described. Yi's pre-Liberation recognition was in fact a public acknowledgement of a specific political agenda, of the topicality of his novels, rather than their artistic quality. This was what his KAPF colleague Kim Nam-ch'ŏn lamented in one of his articles published soon after Liberation.⁴⁴⁹ So I would deem Yi Ki-yŏng a typical "topical" writer, not an artistic genius—even though, I must stress, this approach by no means diminishes his historical significance.

This, then, raises the question: what indeed was this attractive topicality? While Yi Ki-yŏng is customarily depicted as a Communist proletarian writer, a vocalist for the revolutionary class struggle⁴⁵⁰, a representative of socialist values⁴⁵¹ etc., Brian Myers has remarked that the KAPF writers "never evinced a real understanding of Marxist ideology",⁴⁵² and this observation is totally apposite in the case of Yi Ki-yŏng. Although in the 1920s and 1930s Yi undoubtedly sympathized with what may be defined as "popular socialism" in its egalitarian and humanistic manifestation, the writer was no different from his profoundly ignorant colleagues in respect of his actual knowledge of basic Marxian doctrines. His writings are indeed permeated with a fashionable revolutionary rhetoric which is often of Marxian pedigree; however, the proletariat-centered approach to the world and society, ideas of class struggle or the concept of Communist revolution etc. are barely discernible in the pre-Liberation works of Yi Ki-yŏng. Any leftist motives contained in his novels appear secondary and insignificant to what must be described as the leitmotif of his literature – that is his support of the traditional Korean peasants' attitudes and values. This was the real topicality which won Yi Ki-yŏng the wide acclaim of his contemporaries.

The success of the traditional peasant perspective in literature and art was quite predictable in the intellectual atmosphere of colonial Korea with its popular myth of "unspoiled village life" and strong anti-urban, anti-modern tendencies among even the most educated.⁴⁵³ Korea was not unique in this regard: the same trends were prominent among intellectuals in many other colonial or underdeveloped societies. Samuel L. Popkin, a student of Vietnamese rural society, has made an insightful remark: "Pre-capitalist village is seen as a unique form attributable to special virtues of the race or culture... A way of life that may have existed only for lack of alternatives is extolled as a virtue. Peasants who had little or nothing to eat are assumed to have had a rich

⁴⁴⁹ Kim Yun-sik, *Haebang kongganŭi munhak saron* [A Study of the Literature of the Liberation Period], Seoul: Taehakkyo ch'ulp'anbu, 1989, 177.

⁴⁵⁰ For the North Korean accounts see An Ham-gwang, *Chosŏn munhaksa* [History of Korean Literature], Pyŏngyang: Kyoyuk tosŏ ch'ulp'ansa, 1956, 602-634; *Chosŏn munhaksa (1926-1945)* [History of Korean Literature (1926-1945)], P'yŏngyang: Kwahak, paek kwa sajon ch'ulp'ansa, 1981, 378-379, 435-448.

⁴⁵¹ Na Pyŏng-ch'ŏl, *Munhak-ŭi ihae* [Understanding Literature], Seoul: Munye ch'ulp'ansa, 1995, 307-311.

⁴⁵² Brian Myers, *Han Sŏr-ya and North Korean Literature*, 27.

⁴⁵³ For a good sketch of the anti-urban feelings expressed by the Korean intellectuals, see: Im Hŏn-yŏng, "The Meaning of the City in Korean Literature", *Korea Journal* 27 (5.1987), 24-25.

spiritual life. Sons who may have stayed with their fathers only in order to survive are credited with filial piety... Somehow what might only have been the necessities or oppressions of one era come to be interpreted as traditional values during the next”.⁴⁵⁴ In Korea this tendency was also strengthened by the strong spiritual influence of Russian culture which itself exhibited a persistent “peasant myth” propagated, most notably, by Tolstoy.⁴⁵⁵

Thus many Korean intellectuals were ready to hail the voice of an authentic peasant, a supposed repository of the national essence – and Yi was welcomed as such a peasant who found a way to articulate himself.⁴⁵⁶ Even readers accustomed to high literary standards chose to turn a blind eye to the imperfections in his writings, which they perceived as truly “national” and thus sorely needed. Notably, many South Korean intellectuals still portray Yi Ki-yŏng along similar lines. A prominent South Korean writer Kim Nam-il admits that “frankly speaking, Yi Ki-yŏng belongs to the most boring writers of his contemporaries, incomparable with Yŏm Sang-sŏp, Chae Man-sik and the others”. Yet Kim Nam-il extols the value of Yi Ki-yŏng on the basis of the fact that “in the dark period of Japanese colonization Yi Ki-yŏng carefully observed our people’s life and engendered a hope for the future” and for this reason alone he can be “of much help to us”.⁴⁵⁷

The other characteristics, which attracted readers to Yi’s writings, were the enlightenment motives: protests against prejudice and superstition, general anti-clericalism and calls for modern education, eulogies to personal freedom, etc. A special place was reserved for the theme of women’s liberation, including a critique of the Confucian system of early marriage, calls for women’s education and the promotion of the principle of free love etc. These themes were quite popular in Korean literature from its *sinsosŏl* or “new novel” period of the early 1900s.

These tendencies were not necessarily incompatible with the Marxist or, more broadly, socialist ideas, yet they do not give us sufficient grounds to describe Yi’s works as “revolutionary” or “Communist”. It is significant that after Liberation these subjects, albeit laced with official Pyongyang rhetoric, still remained dominant in Yi Ki-yŏng’s works. Considering the fact that Yi’s writings formed the basic canon of North Korean literature, it is important to investigate the ideological core of his works and question the widespread perception of Yi Ki-yŏng as the founding father of an alleged proletarian/Marxian fiction in Korea.

⁴⁵⁴ Samuel L. Popkin, *The rational Peasant. The Political Economy of Rural Society in Vietnam*, London: University of California Press, 1979, 3.

⁴⁵⁵ Mun Sŏk-u, “Rŏsia sasiljŭi munhak-ŭi suyong-kwa kŭ hakmunjŏk pyŏnyong, tolŭsŭtoi chungsimŭro”, 207-255.

⁴⁵⁶ Im Hŏn-yŏng, “The Meaning of the City in Korean Literature”, 24-25.

⁴⁵⁷ Kim Nam-il, “Ije nuga Yi Ki-yŏng-ŭl ilgŭl gosinga?” [Who Will Read Yi Ki-yŏng Today?], *Silch’ŏn munhak*, 1999, Autumn, 79-85.

Childhood and youth

Yi Ki-yŏng was born on May 29 1895, in Hwaryong village, Paeban township, Asan county, Southern Ch'ungch'ŏng province. Most of his childhood was spent in Chungŏmri village, Pukmyŏn township, Ch'ŏnan county in the same province.⁴⁵⁸ In 1898 the writer's family moved to Chungŏmri village to live closer to relatives who were small-scale tenants in the area.

The soil was extremely barren and the village was deemed to be a "minch'on" village, meaning that only poor peasants inhabited the area, and that no *yangban* lived there permanently.⁴⁵⁹ Yi's penname of "Minch'on" was taken from the description of his village.⁴⁶⁰ The writer used many autobiographical details in his works and depicted his native village many times in his novels and short stories, including *Native Land* (*Kohyang*), *Spring* (*Pom*), and "The Peasant's House" ("Nongbu-ŭi chip").

The childhood of the novelist was miserable and poor. His family consisted of a grandmother, mother (Pak of Milyang lineage, 1869-1905), a younger brother and Yi Ki-yŏng himself. His father Yi Min-ch'ang (1873-1918)⁴⁶¹ did not play a significant role in the family's life.

The domestic environment was typical of the modernizing Korea of the early 20th century, when the clash between new realities and longstanding traditions gave rise to countless personal tragedies. One such tradition was *ch'ohon* or early marriage where a boy in his early teens was impelled to marry a slightly older girl. After marriage the boy, if his family had the means, could be sent to study in Seoul or abroad where he often acquired new Western ideas and refused to return home to his "unsophisticated and rustic" wife. The wife had no choice but to remain with her in-laws and raise children, frequently without her husband's support.

This had been the case with Yi Ki-yŏng's parents. Though not officially divorced, they lived separately. At the age of 20 Yi's father passed the official military examinations, which made him eligible for a military commission. However, the number of applicants greatly exceeded the number of available commissions, and one had to try hard to get one. Thus, Yi Min-ch'ang subsequently moved to Seoul in search of a suitable job while the family remained in the countryside, working the land. The father's attempts to find a decent job were disappointing. Furthermore, he was more interested in politics and socializing rather than in providing for his family. Yi Min-ch'ang visited his family once a year and provided them with little support. Yi's mother shouldered all responsibility for the family.⁴⁶²

⁴⁵⁸ Yi Ki-yong and Han Sŏr-ya, *Yisang-kwa noryŏk* [Ideas and labour], Pyongyang: Minch'ŏng ch'ulp'ansa, 1958, 6-7; Ivanova, *Li Gien: Zhizn' i tvorchestvo*, 5.

⁴⁵⁹ Sin Ku-hyŏn, "Minch'ŏn Yi Ki-yŏng", in *Hyŏndae chakka ron* [Study on contemporary writers], P'yŏngyang: Chosŏn chakka tongmaeng ch'ulp'ansa, 1960, Vol.2: 91.

⁴⁶⁰ Yi Ki-yŏng, Han Sŏr-ya, *Yisang-kwa noryŏk*, 8.

⁴⁶¹ Yi Sang-gyŏng, *Yi Ki-yŏng sidae-wa munhak*, 44.

⁴⁶² Sin Ku-hyŏn, "Minch'ŏn Yi Ki-yŏng", 91.

When Yi Ki-yŏng was 11 years old, the whole family caught typhus and Yi's mother died. Yi's father had no choice but to remain with the family and even before the official mourning period for his recently deceased wife had ended he married again.⁴⁶³ Being a *kaehwa sasangga* or disciple of the enlightenment ideas himself, Yi Min-ch'ang introduced his son to some popular concepts of the period including the quest for freedom along with dissent at early marriage and other patriarchal traditions of Korean society.⁴⁶⁴ These concepts made a strong and lasting impression on the young Yi Ki-yŏng.

Unfortunately, the "civilizing ideas" which his father propounded contrasted with the life around Yi Ki-yŏng. Yi Min-ch'ang, captivated by the contemporary politics and fashionable ideas, would spend all his money on impractical projects while the family suffered under the weight of mounting debt.⁴⁶⁵ Despite his enlightenment rhetoric, the father failed to help Yi Ki-yŏng gain a decent education.⁴⁶⁶ Yi Ki-yŏng later recalled that his family was so poor they could not afford to buy paper for his schooling and that he had to practice writing on cinnamon leaves.⁴⁶⁷ The schools Yi visited following his seventh birthday were quite inferior and the writer remembers them with disgust. Learning Chinese characters did not come easily to Yi Ki-yŏng and the boy was irritated by the traditional teaching practices, the use of ancient Chinese texts and by the absence of modern textbooks.⁴⁶⁸ It would appear that a strong dislike for the Chinese writing system remained characteristic of Yi Ki-yong all his life. In the 1940s he was very prominent in the movement against the use of Chinese characters, a fact which some Soviet scholars noted approvingly.⁴⁶⁹

For financial reasons Yi Ki-yŏng discontinued his education at the primary school level and joined the family in agricultural work. In spite of Yi Min-ch'ang frequent harangues against early marriages, he forced his son into such a marriage when the boy was just 14 years old. This decision was supposedly to please Yi's grandmother who at the time was approaching her 60th birthday and could not wait to see her first great-grandson. Yet the union proved to be a disaster. Yi Ki-yŏng never managed to overcome his feelings of unease towards his first wife Cho Pyŏng-gi (1891-1957), an uneducated peasant woman.⁴⁷⁰ The mixture of physical disgust and guilt which he felt he later passionately described in many of his works and in *Native Land* (*Kohyang*) in particular.

Immediately following his marriage Yi ran away from home to wander across the Korean countryside. This life as a vagabond lasted for five years. Soviet and North

⁴⁶³ Yi Sang-gyŏng, *Yi Ki-yŏng sidae-wa munhak*, 50.

⁴⁶⁴ Yi Myŏng-jae, *Pukhan munhak sajŏn*, 367.

⁴⁶⁵ Sin Ku-hyŏn, "Minch'ŏn Yi Ki-yŏng", 93.

⁴⁶⁶ Yi Myŏng-jae, *Pukhan munhak sajŏn*, 367.

⁴⁶⁷ Yi Sang-gyŏng, *Yi Ki-yŏng sidae-wa munhak*, 45.

⁴⁶⁸ Yi Ki-yŏng, Han Sŏr-ya, *Yisang-kwa noryŏk*, 8-10.

⁴⁶⁹ Arkadii Perventsev, *V Koree* [In Korea], Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1950, 25.

⁴⁷⁰ Yi Sang-gyŏng, *Yi Ki-yŏng sidae-wa munhak*, 50

Korean scholars explained Yi's meanderings as the writer's desire for new life experiences or to get closer to the suffering Korean people, etc.⁴⁷¹ Sin Gu-hyŏn called this period of Yi Ki-yŏng's biography "Yi's universities of life" which is an obvious allusion to Gorky's autobiographical book about his own wanderings around Russia (Gorky's book bore the title *Moi Universitety (My Universities)*). However, it is much more likely that Yi just wanted to escape the life where he was forced to deal with a wife whom he loathed, hard labor and hopeless poverty.

The sudden death of his father and grandmother in 1918 prompted Yi Ki-yŏng to return home and assume the role of breadwinner to the rest of his family. At this time Yi Ki-yŏng, while teaching at Yŏnghwa women's school in Ronsan, became temporarily absorbed by Christian ideas.⁴⁷² Christianity was a rapidly growing religion in Korea in the 1910s. It was strongly associated with the new Western way of life, education and enlightenment and was especially attractive to the young teacher.⁴⁷³ Yi Ki-yŏng's fascination with Christian beliefs was so strong that under their influence he refused to perform the traditional sacrificial rites or *chesa* in honor of his deceased father and grandmother. Indeed, he burned their funeral tablets or *hŭnpaek*, much to the horror and outrage of his relatives.

A closer personal acquaintance with Christian missionaries whom Yi later called "wolves in sheep's clothing," led him to disappointment not only with Christian ideas but religion in general. Loathing of Buddhism, shamanism and Christianity became another recurring theme in Yi's novels which frequently refer to the discrepancy between the lofty words of sermons and the real behavior of clergymen.

After 1918 Yi Ki-yŏng changed jobs several times and took part in the activities of the local youth group. He also read a lot of books and magazines which he acquired from Japan.⁴⁷⁴ In 1922 Yi made a decision to continue his education. Despite the resistance of his relatives, he once again abandoned the family and traveled to Tokyo where he studied at the School of English Language and Politics for a year.⁴⁷⁵ This was a very active period in his life, full of hardships and important experiences. In order to earn some money for his studies, Yi was forced to take a number of odd jobs in Japan. In the process he became acquainted with the life of Tokyo's poor and fell under the influence of the then popular socialist ideas. In Japan Yi read Russian and early Soviet literature for the first time and became close friends with the famous Korean literary

⁴⁷¹ V.I. Ivanova, *Li Gien: Zhizn' i tvorchestvo*, 7-8; Sin Ku-hyŏn, *Yi Ki-yŏng sidae-wa munhak*, 95-96.

⁴⁷² Yi Ki-yŏng, Han Sŏr-ya, *Yisang-kwa noryŏk*, 19.

⁴⁷³ For an analysis of the social functions of Christianity in Korea see: Kenneth Wells, *New God, New Nation. Protestants and Self-Reconstruction Nationalism in Korea 1896-1937*, Sydney: Allen&Unwin, 1990.

⁴⁷⁴ Yi Ki-yŏng, Han Sŏr-ya, *Yisang-kwa noryŏk*, 25.

⁴⁷⁵ Yi Myŏng-jae. *Pukhan munhak sajŏn*, 367.

personality Cho Myŏng-hŭi.⁴⁷⁶ Unfortunately Yi Ki-yŏng was again unable to complete his studies. The Tokyo earthquake of 1923 led to a bloody massacre of Koreans resident in Japan and Yi, like many other Korean students, chose to return home.

This short stay in Tokyo had a profound influence on Yi Ki-yŏng's life. He finally abandoned his long-cherished hope of continuing with his formal education. He also turned his back on the advice of his family to find a proper job.⁴⁷⁷ What he now strove for was to express his new thoughts and experiences through literature.

Yi Ki-yŏng's pre-Liberation experience was quite typical of the period: young and enthusiastic yet impoverished, he was undereducated yet inspired by the new ideas of his age. However, his close acquaintance with the grinding poverty of village life and the desperation of the urban poor made Yi Ki-yŏng special among his contemporary writers.

Yi's pre-KAPF Writings

The first work of this future "pillar of socialist realism" dealt with a topic which was quite popular in the Korean literature of the 1920s: the sentimental motif of separated or doomed love.

Yi Ki-yŏng's first unpublished novel "Darkness" ("Amhŭk") (1924) described an unhappy love affair between a Japanese girl and a Korean student in Japan. The novel also bore the cumbersome title of "White Herons Flying Under the Shade of Death" ("Chukŭm-ŭi Kŭrimjae Narŭnŭn Paekrotte"), in keeping with the recently established tradition of the "new novel". This work, as Yi Ki-yŏng himself admitted, was strongly influenced by the Japanese novel "Growing Up In the Red Kaolin" (1921) by Nakanishi Inoshuke. Nakanishi became the first Japanese writer to mention the presence of Koreans in Japan in his writings, which made them very popular among Korean youth at the time.⁴⁷⁸

In later years Yi Ki-yŏng defined his first novel as a "failure".⁴⁷⁹ In 1957 he joked in an article about his first literary experience: "I was like a toothless baby trying to munch on beans and rice".⁴⁸⁰

Following this initial failure Yi Ki-yŏng abandoned novels for a while. His first published work was a short story entitled "Elder Brother's Secret Letter" ("Oppa-ŭi Pimil P'yŏngji") (March, 1924), the storyline of which is as follows:

⁴⁷⁶ V.I. Ivanova, "Li Gien i ego roman "Zemlia" [Yi Ki-yŏng and his novel "Land"], in *Kratkie soobscheniia instituta vostokovedeniia* [Short Reports of the Oriental Studies Institute], Moscow: Izdatel'stvo AN SSSR, 1955, 29.

⁴⁷⁷ Yi Sang-gyŏng, *Yi Ki-yŏng sidae-wa munhak*, 78.

⁴⁷⁸ Yi Ki-yŏng, "Silp'aehan ch'ŏnyŏ changp'yŏng" [My First Story as a Failure], *Chogwang*, 1939, #12, 35.

⁴⁷⁹ Yi Ki-yŏng, Han Sŏr-ya, *Yisang-kwa noryŏk*, 42.

⁴⁸⁰ Yi Ki-yŏng, "KAPF sidae-ŭi hoesanggi" [Recollections of the KAPF], *Chosŏn munhak*, 1957, #8, 85.

The protagonist, the 20 year-old Maria, feels unwanted and is constantly humiliated by her arrogant and spoiled elder brother. Despite his obvious insolence, her brother receives everybody's respect as a man while she is invariably treated as a worthless female. In her heart Maria protests against this injustice and disgrace. "The only weapon my brother uses as an argument with me is: "What on earth can you, a woman, understand?!"⁴⁸¹ she muses. Maria easily sees through her brother's hypocritical religiosity, which other people accept at face value. Thus it comes as no surprise to find that her brother turns out to be a womanizer who betrays many innocent young girls in the town including her close friend Yŏng-sun.

The story touches a sensitive issue – the inequality of the sexes in Korean society. This theme was not itself a novelty since the traditional Confucian disregard for women had been discussed since at least 1906 in the "new novels" (*sinsosŏl*)⁴⁸² and was particularly prominent in the works of Yi Kwang-su, a future political opponent of Yi Ki-yŏng.⁴⁸³ Yi Ki-yŏng wrote the story in one week in order to participate in a literary contest sponsored by *Kaebŏk* magazine⁴⁸⁴ and won third prize in April 1924.⁴⁸⁵

In an ideological sense Yi's debut is hardly reconcilable with the officially approved North Korean image of Yi Ki-yŏng as the unflinching representative of the Marxist approach, a protector of the poor. No "poor" appear in the story. Despite the attempts of North Korean scholarship to ascribe a "class position" to the author of "Secret Letter",⁴⁸⁶ the story was in fact written in accordance with the common liberal conventions of the age.⁴⁸⁷ It is no accident that Soviet scholarship, while eulogizing Yi's "true proletarian" novels of the 1920s and early 1930s, tends to pass over his first work, or refer to it only briefly.⁴⁸⁸

⁴⁸¹ Yi Ki-yŏng, "Oppa-ŭi pimil p'yŏnji" [Elder Brother's Secret Letter], in *Hyŏndae chosŏn munhak sŏnjip*, [Anthology of Contemporary Korean Literature], Pyongyang: Chosŏn chakka tongmaeng ch'ul'p'ansa, 1958, 3.

⁴⁸² Yun Pyŏng-no, *Hanguk kŭn hyŏndae chakka chakp'umron*, 13.

⁴⁸³ One may refer here, for instance, to Yi Kwang-su's famous novel *Heartlessness* (*Mujŏng*) printed for the first time in 1917. (See Yi Kwang-su, *Mujŏng* [Heartlessness], Seoul: Sŏ mundang, 1997).

⁴⁸⁴ Yi Sang-gyŏng, *Yi Ki-yŏng sidae-wa munhak*, 81.

⁴⁸⁵ V.I. Ivanova, *Li Gien: Zhizn' i tvorchestvo*, 15; Yi Myo:ng-jae, *Pukhan munhak sajŏn*, 367.

⁴⁸⁶ Sin Ku-hyŏn, "Minch'ŏn Yi Ki-yŏng", 99.

⁴⁸⁷ Concerning liberal conventions see Yun Pyŏng-no, *Hanguk kŭn hyŏndae chakka chakp'umron*, 15.

⁴⁸⁸ V.N. Li, "Koreiskaia assotsiazhiia proletarskikh pisatelei i proza 20-30 godov" [The KAPF and the fiction of the 1920-1930s], in *Natsional'nye traditsii i genesis sotsialisticheskogo realizma* [National Traditions and the Genesis of Socialist Realism], Moscow: Vostochnaja literatura, 1965, 589; V.I. Ivanova, "Poiski polozhitel'nogo geroia v rannem tvorchestve Li Giena" [Searching for the Positive Hero in the Early Works of Yi Ki-yŏng], in *Koreiskaia literatura* [Korean Literature], Moscow: Izdatel'stvo vostochnoi literatury, 1959, 95; V.I. Ivanova, *Li Gien: Zhizn' i tvorchestvo*, 15.

After the publication of *Secret Letter* Yi Ki-yŏng broke completely with his family and moved to Seoul to earn a living through professional writing. In 1924 Yi Ki-yŏng met the famous leftist writer Cho Myŏng-hŭi who had just returned from Tokyo. They both began to work as correspondents for the *Chosŏn chigwan* where Yi Ki-yŏng also made the acquaintance of Ch'oe Sŏ-hae, Song Yŏng, Yi Ik-sang, Yi Chŏk-hyo and other leftist writers. Around this time Yi Ki-yŏng also remarried. Though his choice was a so-called “new woman” (that is, a woman who had received a touch of Western education or *sin yŏsŏng*) named Hong Ŭl-sun (1905-?),⁴⁸⁹ we should not overestimate the extent of Hong's emancipation in the contemporary feminist sense. From the recollections of Chŏng Ryul who often visited Yi Ki-yŏng at home, Hong was a quite traditional, mild and shy Korean housewife who shared all of the hardships of life with her husband without complaint. Yi Ki-yŏng appeared to be happy with their relationship.

Yi's First KAPF Period (1925-1927)

The period from the publication of “Elder Brother's Secret Letter” to the late 1920s was a remarkable period in Yi Ki-yŏng's literary activity. It was a time when Yi was relatively free of political responsibilities, peer pressure and other external constraints and was guided largely by his own views and convictions. Yi joined the Korean Proletarian Art Federation (KAPF) when it was established in 1925. Up to 1927 the KAPF remained a rather amorphous organization. The Japanese censorship at the time was relatively mild, and Yi Ki-yŏng had an unparalleled opportunity to express himself fully and sincerely.

On the whole, his ideas at the time were synchronous with those of the so-called “new tendency” literature or *sin kyŏnghyang*, which most North and South Korean scholars now refer to as the forerunner or even the initial stage of “proletarian literature” in Korea.⁴⁹⁰

The “New Tendency” literature⁴⁹¹ emerged as a response by the Korean intellectuals to the challenges of colonial modernity and the impoverishment of the masses of the Korean people - the peasantry. These were considered to be the negative effects of a foreign cultural and economic invasion. While the “new tendency” architect Yim Chŏng-jae proclaimed a socialist bias to this new literary trend, it was in fact a rather naïve leftist project which promoted conservative anti-industrialism and anti-urbanism along with “simplicity” (Kor: *sobakham*) as “truly Korean” virtues. On this

⁴⁸⁹ Yi Sang-gyŏng, *Yi Ki-yŏng sidae-wa munhak*, 130.

⁴⁹⁰ As an example of South Korean scholarship's view see Yun Pyŏng-no, *Hanguk kūn hyŏndae chakka chakp'umron*, 17-18. The North Korean view is represented by Han Hyo, “Chayŏnjuūi-rŭl pandaehanŭn t'ujaeng-e issŏsŏui chosŏn munhak” [Korean Literature in Struggle with Naturalism] (1953), in *Hyŏndae munhak pip'yŏng charyo chip (ibukp'uŏn)* 2 [Anthology of Contemporary North Korean Critical Works], Seoul: T'aehaksa, 1993, 391-522.

⁴⁹¹ This term was first used in an article by Yim Chŏng-jae, “Munsa chegune yohanun ilmun” [One Sentence to Men of Intelligence], published in *Kaebŏk* #7, 1923. (Cited in Mun Sŏk-u, “Tturŭgenepŭ-wa Gorikki munhak-ŭi kyŏngu”, 297).

point, as Brian Myers has noted, the “new tendency” writers differed little from the contemporary Korean “bourgeois” nationalists.⁴⁹² Both groups decried the same mythical “pure village life” as having been cruelly spoiled by the arrival of modernity.

But the “new tendency” literature did not confine itself to mere lamentations over the lost virtues of a simpler lifestyle. Many representatives of this literature, such as Ch’oe Sŏ-hae (1901-1932), Yi Ik-sang (1895-1930), and the poet Yi Sang-hwa (1901-1943) attempted to approach the miserable situation of the contemporary countryside from a more active leftist, anti-bourgeois position. Their protagonists express their protest through acts of violence, which are both misguided and energetic at the same time. The writings of Ch’oe Sŏ-hae were especially typical in this regard.⁴⁹³

As we have mentioned already, Gorky and his images of romantic paupers, with all their implications of struggle and revolt, had a strong influence on the “new tendency” writers. Yet the rebellious actions of the protagonists in Gorky and the “new tendency” novels had different connotations. Gorky, who was openly hostile towards the Russian traditional village culture and its values, never supported the “myth of the village”. He described the tantrums of his characters sympathetically but with no illusion, as the unavoidable result of poverty, illiteracy and misery rather than as a kind of heroism.⁴⁹⁴ His revolting heroes are asked to be tamed and civilized in order to be socially productive— be it by the positive influence of sympathetic city intelligentsia (“Suprugi Orlov” (“The Orlov Spouses”), or by the ideological authority of the Communist Party (*Mat’ (Mother)*)).

On the contrary, the Korean leftist authors, as Myers puts it, “saw the way to overcome injustice not in tempering the spontaneity of Korean people – through political organization and the infusion of “consciousness” – but in unleashing it, in allowing it to erupt with a purging force.... The authors indicated their approval by describing the violence with palpable relish – although they were careful to appease censors by ending their stories with the hero in jail”.⁴⁹⁵

Yi Ki-yŏng, being on friendly terms with the “new tendency” writers and sharing many of their values, appeared however less radical than most of the fellow writers of this group. While the exploitation, social discontent and misery of his characters was quite in tune with many of the leftist literary conventions, Yi’s early writings were remarkably free of descriptions of spontaneous rebellion.

Let us have a look, for example, at Yi Ki-yŏng’s most representative work of this period, the novel “Poor Village” (“Minch’ŏn”) (November 1925). The South Korean scholar Yi Sang-gyŏng describes it as “the most prominent work of Yi’s early period” –

⁴⁹² Brian Myers, *Han Sŏr-ya and North Korean Literature*, 17.

⁴⁹³ *Who’s Who in Korean Literature*, 47-48.

⁴⁹⁴ M. Gorky, “Konovalov”, “Foma Gordeev”, “Na dne” [The Low Depths], in Maxim Gorky *Izbrannye proizvedeniia v trekh tomakh* [Collected Works in Three Volumes], Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe isdatel’stvo hudozhestvennoi literatury, 1951, Vol. 2: 81-130, 144-408, 524-591.

⁴⁹⁵ Brian Myers. *Han Sŏr-ya and North Korean Literature*, 19.

and I would agree with this assessment.⁴⁹⁶ Yet his following statement that “...in this novel Yi Ki-yŏng mirrored the class struggle between landlords and tenants” sounds rather unconvincing. Let us have a look at the story, the plot of which reads as follows:

All the inhabitants of a poor village or *minch’ŏn*⁴⁹⁷ live hard and miserable lives except for the rich *yangban* gentry family, the Paks, whose son indulges himself in buying new concubines. His next target is Chŏm-sun, the young and beautiful daughter of the poor peasant Kim. The girl is in love with an intelligent and well-mannered student who had recently returned from Seoul after completing his studies and who is known among the peasants by the respected nickname of “Seoul taek” which means “a person from Seoul”, or a “Seoulite.” While his young peasant friends work, Seoulite preaches ideas of social equality to them (“there is no actual difference between a small merchant and a noble man”⁴⁹⁸, “everybody must work”)⁴⁹⁹ and entertains the country girls with copious tales of the “beautiful life that could be had on this land had the bad guys not grasped power”.

“Imagine us living here in these beautiful mountain surroundings, in clean houses. We would live here without a concern for food or clothing. Our parents would work in the fields and we would go to school for study and fun. In the evenings after returning home from school we would help our parents in the fields or go for a walk in the mountains. How beautiful our life would be!

If only all the people would work together and were not separated into rich and poor! How pleasant it is to love and respect your neighbor! One day we would gather in your house, the next day you could come to mine. How joyful it would be! The birds would sing about the happiness of mankind and the flowers would reflect people’s joy. Everything in the world would be for the edification of man. We would be happy even watching the moon!

But look at us. In childhood we are unable to study. Our aged parents slave away day and night in the fields yet remain living in poverty. Women’s hands are swollen because of grinding grain. Young people, no matter whether boys or girls, cannot love freely of their own choice. We are hungry and poorly dressed; we live in meager huts, suffering from fleas and bedbugs. And it is all because bad people have stolen our wealth and forced many who work loyally and tirelessly into the abyss of poverty. Thus, beautiful moonlight or pleasant currents of air do not matter to us for our hearts are always suffering”.⁵⁰⁰

⁴⁹⁶ Yi Sang-gyŏng, *Yi Ki-yŏng sidae-wa munhak*, 105.

⁴⁹⁷ “Minch’ŏn” in Korean means “a poor village where no noble people live, or a village where all people live on small merchandising”.

⁴⁹⁸ Yi Ki-yŏng, “Minch’on” [Poor Village], in *Hyŏndae chosŏnmunhak sŏnjip* [Anthology of contemporary Korean literature], Pyongyang: Cho sŏn chakka tongmaeng ch’ulp’ansa, 1958, Vol. 3: 76.

⁴⁹⁹ Yi Ki-yŏng, “Minch’on”, 83.

⁵⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 87.

The girls are touched by Seoulite's speeches. They cry, "dreaming about the beautiful life" ... "because their new friend" ... "has awakened a sadness in their hearts that they had never known before".⁵⁰¹

Meanwhile *yangban* Pak helps the poor Kim family, lending them two straw-bags of rice - and proposes that Chŏm-sun be his concubine. Though his proposal is delivered quite politely and nobody tries to take the girl against her or her parents' will, Chŏm-sun's father reacts with fury. "Grinding his teeth" and "clenching his fists" he berates his wife for being too passive while talking with Pak.

"I would rather die of hunger! How dare he! In fact he suggested that we sell our daughter for rice - to give her to him to be his third or fourth concubine! And what was your answer? You just listened to him? But you should have spat in his filthy face! This man is not a human! Go to him! Tell him that we'd rather give our daughter to dogs than to him, this putrid son of a yangban! He deserves to be spat in the very face!"⁵⁰²

After this Chŏm-sun's father collapses and becomes seriously ill, and to pay for his treatment the family resorts to the very means which led Chŏm-sun's father to his deathbed – they send Ch'ŏm-sun to Pak's house as a concubine. Ch'ŏm-sun herself initiates the marriage, asking her father's permission – just like the exemplary selfless heroine of the classical Korean novel *The Tale of Simch'on* (*Simch'onjŏn*) who sacrifices her life to cure her father from disease.

Another bold speech is delivered before the marriage. Ch'ŏm-sun's brother's tirade affirms that "he would rather be in jail then give his sister to Pak" and that "to give him a body is worse than death".⁵⁰³ However he is also totally daunted by the obstacles, like the other family members, who spend the final days before the despised marriage helplessly crying and lamenting about "how cruel is today's world where it is impossible to find really noble people" or "today's world, where nobody wants to help each other".⁵⁰⁴ The descriptions of the family weeping, emotional outbursts and another collapse (now of the grief-stricken mother) occupy some six pages of the text.⁵⁰⁵

When Chŏm-sun is about to leave her parents' house in preparation to ride the marriage palanquin, Seoulite approaches the girl with the following "quiet words": "Chŏm-sun, do not despair! Think over your situation. There must be a path to the new life!"

In the final scene of the novel Chŏm-sun rides the marriage palanquin:

⁵⁰¹ Ibid., 88.

⁵⁰² Ibid., 90.

⁵⁰³ Ibid., 92.

⁵⁰⁴ Ibid., 93.

⁵⁰⁵ Ibid., 93-99.

“The last words of Seoulite echoed in her ears like a drum, again and again: “Chŏm-sun, do not despair! Think over your situation! There must be a path to the new life!” Those words gave her great inspiration. Over and over she pondered: “Well! Whose fault was it that I was sold? Poverty is not a fault. Until this debt is paid I would rather live like a slave, but I will never be a concubine! Never! I would rather die!” Chŏm-sun had made a firm resolution. She bit her lips and her eyes filled with tears”.⁵⁰⁶

In fact the novel fails to glorify struggle of any kind. The writer’s endeavors to place expressions of protest into the mouths of his protagonists turn these quite traditional suffering personages, the embodiment of *han*, into unintentionally comical figures because their righteous words are in such striking contrast to their actions. The girl’s “firm resolution” to “rather die than be a concubine” is made when she is already seated on the palanquin. Her father’s zealous diatribes against Pak and his “firm decision” that it is “better to die of hunger” than to offer his daughter as a concubine is followed by the marriage of Chŏm-sun. Seoulite’s sermons about heaven on Earth are ardently delivered while his listeners work and he remains idle. His farewell words are awash with empty “encouraging” rhetoric rather than any kind of real help for the girl he supposedly “so innocently loves”. In the frequent invectives we can again see the influence of the classical literature with its sentimental style of heroic behavior and lengthy poetic laments (see, for example *Story of Ch’unhyang* (*Ch’unhyangjŏn*)).

The denunciatory tirades in “Poor Village” do not rise above complaints about the cruelty of “today’s world”, where money and decay allegedly rule. It is significant that “today’s world” in the novel is presented as a symbol of all things evil which, as the author obviously assumes, did not exist in the idealized “world of the past”, an alleged era of bucolic harmony. Only in “today’s world” is “money so important”, where “sly misers have their pride” and “people have no nobility”,⁵⁰⁷ while in “yesterday’s world” “yangbans could not live if they had money since they valued their inner pride very highly”.⁵⁰⁸

It is difficult to agree with the South Korean scholar Yi Sang-gyŏng who insists that “poor peasants in the novel though suffering are not passive and spiritless”.⁵⁰⁹ In effect the characters in “Poor Village” are utterly submissive and inert. Not one character in the novel attempts any act of protest – at least in Ch’oe Sŏ-hae’s style. Yi Sang-gyŏng prefers to explain it in a quite complimentary manner: “The story does not finish with an abstract slogan or idealistic act of revenge, like the stories of the fashionable “new tendency” literature. The reason Yi Ki-yŏng concludes his novel with complete failure is because he understands the seriousness of the social discord much more deeply than the other “new tendency” writers.”⁵¹⁰ In fact, “Poor Village” does

⁵⁰⁶ Ibid., 100.

⁵⁰⁷ Ibid., 70, 89.

⁵⁰⁸ Ibid., 71.

⁵⁰⁹ Yi Sang-gyŏng, *Yi Ki-yŏng sidae-wa munhak*, 106.

⁵¹⁰ Ibid., 108.

finish with an “abstract slogan” – the “invigorating” farewell of Seoulite. Secondly, the sole reason for the contemporary state of social discord which the the author is able to offer us is, in fact, “the greediness” of the “bad guys,” an approach which does not render Yi Ki-yŏng the title of an insightful social analyst.

Soviet scholars found it difficult to reconcile the submissiveness of the “Poor Village” characters with the officially required image of Yi Ki-yŏng as an unbending proletarian writer who was supposed to have a clear-cut class perspective based on the Marxist vision of the world and society. In order to rationalize Yi’s novel they strived to display the discrepancy between the words and deeds of the heroes of “Poor Village”, especially the final fervent words of Seoulite and his actual passivity, as the deliberate intention of the author to “instill righteous indignation in the reader”.⁵¹¹ However, the author’s notion that Seoulite’s words “gave great inspiration” to the weeping heroine robs this interpretation of any sense. V.N. Li, true to the trivializing tenor of Soviet Marxist philology, explains the protagonist’s behavior by the basic insufficiency of his class position. Regurgitating the regular clichés of Soviet literary critics, V.N. Li defines Seoulite as a “worthless hero” who is a “representative of a degenerating gentry”.⁵¹² This explanation will not stand up to criticism either, since Yi Ki-yŏng portrays Seoulite as a definitely positive character.

Indeed, to understand this or any other of Yi’s work of that period a scholar has no choice but to reject the conventional view on Yi Ki-yŏng as a radically revolutionary figure. In fact, nothing in his novels of the period suggests much deviation from the values of the social stratum from which he originated – the traditional impoverished peasantry. The immanent values of “Poor Village” are loyalty to one’s elders, conservatism and passive endurance – indeed, the very traditional virtues which were also considered positive in classical Korean literature.

The Utopian ideal depicted by Seoulite as an allegedly “new life” is, like his “words of protest”, a rather antiquated one. His visions of an ideal society originate from traditional Korean rural community values which include harmonious and moderate manual labor, education for one’s children (a particularly Confucian ideal), and equality and mutual respect amongst the village community members.

The perspectives of the other early stories of Yi Ki-yŏng of this period do not differ much from that of “Poor Village”. Even the allegory “Story About Mice” (1925),⁵¹³ which in Soviet scholarship was treated as “an appeal for the socialist reconstruction of society”,⁵¹⁴ is no exception in this regard.

The allegory describes the family of mice named Kwak which is moving from the house of the poor peasant Sudol to the rich house of the Kims. The mouse family compares the two ways of life and reaches the conclusion that the human order of

⁵¹¹ V.I. Ivanova, *Li Gien: Zhizn’ i tvorchestvo*, 21; V.N. Li, “Koreiskaia assotsiatsiia proletarskih pisatelei i prosa 20-30-h godov”, 590.

⁵¹² V.N. Li, “Koreiskaia assotsiatsiia proletarskih pisatelei i prosa 20-30-h godov”, 590.

⁵¹³ Yi Ki-yŏng, “Chwi iyagi”, 59-66.

⁵¹⁴ V.I. Ivanova, *Li Gien: Zhizn’ i tvorchestvo*, 21.

things is unfair because those who work hard cannot live well. Here are some of their observations: “People’s money is just like the devil’s hat which enchants people”⁵¹⁵; “Those who steal live well”; “Rich people are as greedy as pigs”.⁵¹⁶ Kwak, the mouse, draws the following conclusion: “Sudol has the right to demand the return of the land which they took away from him. He must stick together with the other peasants because if you submit, things only get worse... To wait for mercy from the rich is just as senseless as to wait for a black crow to turn into a white heron”.⁵¹⁷

As a practical step towards the realization of their resolute yet vague social program, the mice decide to seek revenge on the ill-spirited daughter-in-law of the rich family who refused to help a poor neighbor's family by lending them rice. The brave mice urinate on her “ugly face” while she is sleeping. Kwak the mouse then steals a wad of money from the rich Kim and carries his loot to the simple hut of the Sudol family. The story concludes with the final admonition of Kwak the mouse:

“There are good and evil forces in this world. The good force comes from the unity of people, and the bad one comes from individual violence. Good people must unite their good souls. And we should always use our strength to help the good people”.

Despite the fact that it was the only story of the period in which Yi suggests any kind of resolute projects for social change, this work could hardly be interpreted as an “appeal for socialist reconstruction.” Instead, “Story About Mice” evokes the traditional pattern of Hong Gil-dong, a Korean Robin Hood who robs the rich to feed the poor – in accordance with a centuries-old pattern of rebel peasant behavior. Rather than change society, peasant riots tend to conserve and stabilize it, “consolidating the traditional political system by purging it. They never challenge more than the abuses of the traditional regimes”.⁵¹⁸ In fact “Story About Mice” once again sticks to the egalitarian ethic of the patriarchal Korean peasantry with its condemnation of more fortunate members who do not help their less fortunate brethren.

These and the other stories by Yi Ki-yŏng from the period, such as “Nongbu Chŏng To-ryŏng” (“Peasant Chŏng To-ryŏng”) (1925), “Kananhan Saramdŭl” (“Poor People”) (1925), “Onammae tun abŏji” (“The Father of the Five”) (1926), “Nongbu-ŭi chip” (“The House of the Peasant”) (1927), etc deal mostly with rural life. And it is difficult to agree with the South Korean scholar Kim Chae-yong who claims that Yi Ki-yŏng “contrary to common peasant writers, observed rural life from the perspective of a worker”.⁵¹⁹ Indeed, Yi Ki-yŏng in his perspectives did not deviate from the discourse of

⁵¹⁵ Yi Ki-yŏng, “Chwi iyagi”, 62.

⁵¹⁶ Ibid., 62, 63.

⁵¹⁷ Ibid., 63.

⁵¹⁸ Jean Chesneaux, *Peasant revolts in China 1840-1949*, translated by C.A. Curwen, London: Thames and Hudson, 1973, 21.

⁵¹⁹ Kim Chae-yong, “Iljeha nonch'on-ŭi hwangp'yehwa-wa nongmin-ŭi chuch'ejŏk kaksŏng” [The Devastation of the Peasants Under Japanese Colonial Rule and Awakening of Their National Consciousness], in *Yi Ki-yŏng sŏnjip* [Collected Works of Yi Ki-yŏng], Seoul: P'ulpit', 1989, Vol.1:568.

the traditional village community. His “inner hero” of the period can be defined as an enlightened peasant who is infuriated by the arrival of capitalist modernity in his stable world. The only counterbalance to the harshness of the new life he can see is a return to an imagined social harmony of the past. He is not inclined to protect the traditional ways unconditionally, however. With some basic education he comes to perceive some aspects of traditional rural life as annoying, with the long-established institution of enforced early marriage a major evil.⁵²⁰

Yi's second KAPF period (1927-1934)

The next period of activity in Yi Ki-yŏng's career is closely connected to the “Bolshevization” of the KAPF. This process was initiated by the militants in the Tokyo branch of the KAPF (Yim Hwa, Yi Pung-man etc) who, “dissatisfied with the group's general aimlessness and the poor quality of its literature, began pushing in 1927 for its transformation from a small gathering of artistically inclined intellectuals into a mass organization with an openly revolutionary character”.⁵²¹ The result of their endeavors was a new program of the KAPF which outlined drastic changes in the organization's activity. It stated: “In our class struggle we stand on the side of a Marxist understanding of the historical process. Considering proletarian literature as one of the frontiers of proletarian struggle we design our missions as follows: 1) a decisive struggle against feudal-bourgeois ideology; 2) the struggle against barbarian regimes and despotism; 3) the struggle for the creation of conscious class activists”.⁵²² By 1930 the radical wing took over complete control of the KAPF.⁵²³

It would appear as if Yi Ki-yŏng accepted the new KAPF “struggle” policy wholeheartedly. Not only did he profess his support of “bolshevization” by publishing a set of articles in *Chosŏn chigwang* magazine,⁵²⁴ but he also started to fashion his writings according to the new political requirements. Yet, these new tendencies failed to substitute completely his old visions.

Let's have a look at two of his most tendentious short stories of the period, “Wŏn-bo” (1928) and “Paper Factory Village” (1930).

⁵²⁰ One should not overestimate, however, the degree of Yi Ki-yŏng's devotion to the theme of women's liberation in general. Ken Wells convincingly argues that in his articles Yi Ki-yŏng in fact dismissed a feminist gender position. See Kenneth Wells, “The Price of Legitimacy: Women and the Kūnuhoe Movement, 1927-1931”, in Gi-Wook Shin and Michael Robinson (eds.), *Colonial Modernity in Korea*, Cambridge (Massachusetts) and London: Harvard University Press, 1999, 191-221.

⁵²¹ Brian Myers, *Han Sŏr-ya and North Korean Literature*, 22.

⁵²² “Koreiskaia literatura” [Korean Literature], in *Literaturnaia entsiklopedia* [Literary Encyclopaedia], Moscow: Academia nauk, 1931, Vol. 5: 460-470.

⁵²³ Brian Myers, *Han Sŏr-ya and North Korean Literature*, 26

⁵²⁴ Yi Sang-gyŏng, *Yi Ki-yŏng sidae-wa munhak*, 450.

“Wŏn-bo”⁵²⁵ describes an accidental meeting between the poor peasant Wŏn-bo and his wife and the worker Sŏk-pong in a Seoul doss-house. Wŏn-bo, an old man whose legs had been crippled in an automobile accident, came to Seoul in a desperate search for medical help, which he failed to receive because of a lack of money. It also happened to be his first visit to a big city. He is a typical *sobakhan* character who observes life through innocent, childish eyes. Sŏk-pong, an out-of-work miner who is the other guest at the simple inn, explains to the elderly couple why they, a worker and a peasant who have both worked all their lives, are now completely destitute. “Those who only play and eat stole the wealth of the peasants and the workers,” he explains.⁵²⁶ The only way out, Sŏk-pong insists, is to “struggle against the ruling class”. Wŏn-bo is completely convinced and thrilled at Sŏk-pong’s words of wisdom. His deathbed desire is to deliver these sage words to his grandson so that he too might come to know the truth about life.

The South Korean scholar Kim Sang-sŏn has characterized “Wŏn-bo” as “a story about the unity of the aspirations of workers and peasants”,⁵²⁷ while the North Korean scholar Sin Gu-Hyŏn praises it highly as a story about “the awakening of class consciousness” in Wŏn-bo, a peasant with a soul which is “as pure and clean as a white piece of paper”.⁵²⁸ These were probably the actual intentions of the author. The question is, however, how did Yi Ki-yŏng realize these politically-motivated intentions?

Initially, the instant “awakening of class consciousness” in a peasant hero with a mind literally as clean “as a piece of paper” would not appear too implausible. But Yi Ki-yŏng describes Wŏn-bo as a totally ignorant man who has spent all his life in a remote rural area. Wŏn-bo does not even know what city dwellers do in their everyday life; he is surprised when he fails to find the familiar fields and vegetable plots in the city. How could such a childishly innocent soul grasp in a single day complicated social theory which is narrated in such politicized terms as “exploitation”, “the ruling class” etc.? What is even more incredible is that he internalizes these new ideas so completely that his life-long obedience to his superiors is instantly replaced by an eagerness to join the “class struggle”.

In my opinion, the source of the general implausibility of the story lay in Yi Ki-yŏng’s uncritical “borrowing” from foreign literary models – largely from the works of Gorky. Many scholars have highlighted the common points between “Wŏn-bo” and Gorky’s drama “The Low Depths”.⁵²⁹ Although some of the similarities suggested by

⁵²⁵ Yi Ki-yŏng, “Wŏn-bo”, in *Hyŏndae chosŏn munhak sŏnjip* [Anthology of Contemporary Korean Literature], Pyongyang: Chosŏn chakka tongmaeng ch’ulp’ansa, 1958, vol.3: 182-194.

⁵²⁶ *Ibid.*, 189.

⁵²⁷ Kim Sang-sŏn, *Minch’ŏn Yi Ki-yŏng munhak yŏngu* [A Study of the Literature of Minch’ŏn Yi Ki-yŏng], Seoul: Kukhakcharyowŏn, 1999, 508.

⁵²⁸ Sin Ku-hyŏn, “Minch’ŏn Yi Ki-yŏng”, 115-116.

⁵²⁹ See, for instance, Mun Sŏk-u, “Tturŭgenep’ŭ-wa Korikki munhak-ŭi kyŏngu”, 312-316; V.I. Ivanova, “Sovetskaia voenno-patrioticheskaia literatura v Koree 40-50-h godov”, 126-127.

Soviet scholars appear dubious,⁵³⁰ on the whole the parallels between “The Low Depths” and “Wŏn-bo” are undeniable. The settings of both works are quite similar – a humble doss-house where an enlightened hero declaims his “progressive” world-views before a group of pathetic and miserable yet sympathetic listeners. But “The Low Depths” deals with the search for the meaning of life rather than merely propagating political slogans. Yi Ki-yŏng’s story contains more blatant political statements and thus resembles another of Gorky’s work more closely – his novel *Mother* (*Mat’*).⁵³¹ In both works a young and “politically mature” activist successfully enlightens an elderly, uneducated person, infusing him or her with “class consciousness”. Yet one must admit that the “regeneration” of the old woman in *Mother* appears more convincing. Unlike Yi Ki-yŏng, Gorky introduced his heroine to revolutionary ideas gradually and naturally, through her love for her son and sympathy for his friends rather than through some sophisticated intellectual argument.

Despite being steeped in leftist jargon, “Wŏn-bo”’s Marxian credentials appear quite doubtful. It is noteworthy that the main malefactors in Sŏk-pong’s social denunciations are not “capitalists” *per se* but vicious “Seoul folks”. The allegedly Marxist worker Sŏk-pong is infuriated by “city dwellers who took all our possessions and now enjoy life”, “Seoul residents who do not work in the fields yet are always well-fed and amused, who do not weave but wear beautiful dresses”.⁵³² Such an anti-urban, anti-industrial view can hardly be defined as Marxist – which is why the statement of the South Korean scholar Yi Po-yŏng concerning the allegedly “clear socialist tendency” of “Wŏn-bo”⁵³³ sounds unconvincing. I would rather tend to agree with the remark of Brian Myers that, “The crude country mouse/city mouse antimony of Yi Ki-yŏng’s short story “Wŏn-bo” (1928), which tells of a benevolently naive farmer’s disastrous excursion to decadent Seoul, can hardly be regarded as an ideological advance over Ch’oe Sŏ-hae’s fiction”.⁵³⁴ Indeed, the desired “proletarian motives” in the story failed to supplant the usual traditionalist perspective of Yi Ki-yŏng’s novels.

⁵³⁰ As an indisputable example of Gorky’s influence on “Wŏn-bo” V.I. Ivanova points to the similarity of the proverbial phrase of Gorky’s hero Satin “Man – that sounds proud” (Maxim Gorky, “Na dne”, 585) and the words of Yi Ki-yŏng’s exemplary worker hero Sŏk-pong “There is nothing more precious in this world than a man. Yet nowadays men despise men, and the poor are treated like animals.” (Yi Ki-yŏng, “Wŏn-bo”, 190). In my opinion, Gorky’s influence on this particular phrase of Sŏkbong is dubious. In his “Story About Mice” Yi Ki-yŏng had already used the expression “among all the creatures in this world a human being is the most precious” (Yi Ki-yŏng, “Chwi iyagi”, 65) paraphrasing an ancient Chinese saying widely recognized in Korea. In all probability, the genuine origins of Sŏkbong’s phrase lies in the Chinese maxim rather than in Satin’s phrase.

⁵³¹ Maxim Gorky, *Mat’* [Mother], in *Izbrannye proizvedeniia v trekh tomah* [Collected works in Three Volumes]. Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe isdatel’stvo hudozhestvennoi literatury, 1951, Vol.2: 410-729.

⁵³² Yi Ki-yŏng, “Wŏn-bo”, 189,190.

⁵³³ Mun Sŏk-u, “Tturŭgenepŭ-wa Korikki munhak-ŭi kyŏngu”, 314.

⁵³⁴ Brian Myers, *Han Sŏr-ya and North Korean Literature*, 25.

This same tendency clearly revealed itself in his most “proletarian” story, “Paper Factory Village” (“Cheji kongjangch’on”) (1930),⁵³⁵ which describes a workers’ strike, a common setting in the literature of socialist realism. The plot of the story can be summarized as follows:

The workers of the paper factory are driven to desperation by the greediness of their master and decide to go on strike. The idea is in fact that of one of the workers – a slight intellectual who came to the factory in order “to be baptized by labor”. Initially this bookish creature received the mocking nickname Saennim (“Know-it-all”, “Smartie Pants” or “Egg-head”) from his co-workers, but eventually he gains their trust and succeeds in persuading them to struggle for their rights and dignity. The strike ends in failure. Saennim, who turns out to be a writer named Hwang-un in disguise, is imprisoned and petty rivalries tear apart the workers’ ranks. However, Hwang-un is happy since he feels that “the seeds which he planted are growing day and night”.⁵³⁶

Once again, in this allegedly “proletarian” story the workers are practically invisible. The workmen in “Paper Factory Village” appear not as active force, but rather as a dark mass of wretches who have been crippled by harsh labor. Like Gorky’s *Mother*, Yi Ki-yŏng’s story starts with a gloomy description of the factory, including the same comparisons of the workers to hellish “machines” or “slaves of machines”, the factory reality with “a nightmare”, where alcohol and prostitutes are the only known forms of relaxation etc.⁵³⁷ However, unlike *Mother* with its bright “truly proletarian” protagonists, Yi Ki-yŏng’s story includes no vivid personalities among the workmen. The only personal trait of the worker activist Chang which Yi Ki-yŏng mentioned was that “he [was] famous for his industriousness”. In contrast, the author lavished lengthy passages of description on the main character, a delicate and sophisticated intellectual who is clearly reminiscent of common characters in Korean prose at the time, with their immanent weakness and doomed refinement.⁵³⁸ Yi Ki-yŏng verbosely described the sweet love of a factory girl for the main hero, the appearance of a female servant,⁵³⁹ etc, but while conveying Saennim’s “progressive” thoughts and motivation he turned to a stultified prose which was lifted directly from the Communist propaganda of the era.

“Saennim was a person who abandoned bourgeois prejudices, who stood on the path of the fight for the proletariat. From the very beginning he understood the full danger of his fight. But he determined to fight nevertheless from the very moment he entered the factory village. His very arrival at the factory was the first step in a new and sincere life. He made the decision in order to thwart his cowardly ego which was filled with petty bourgeois consciousness. He wanted to become a proletarian, to become a

⁵³⁵ Yi Ki-yŏng, “Cheji kongjang ch’on”, 195-213.

⁵³⁶ Ibid., 213.

⁵³⁷ Gorky, *Mat*, 410-413; Yi Ki-yŏng, “Cheji kongjang ch’on”, 195-196.

⁵³⁸ Yi Ki-yŏng, “Cheji kongjangch’on”, 196.

⁵³⁹ Ibid., 198, 210.

"proper" person. That is why he threw away his writing brush and inkbottle. He wanted to become a worker who constructs life.

Alas, the life he lived before! He spent twenty-five years in a feudal patriarchal environment! But he could break out of it, he could enter into a new life! It demanded courage; he could not imagine that such a weak person as himself could handle physical labor. But he threw away all bourgeois superstitions, cowardice and idleness, and stepped onto the bloody path of struggle!"⁵⁴⁰

Notably, this eulogy appears completely out of the blue and unrelated to the other parts of the story. The reader can only guess what prompted the intellectual to abandon his previous life or what exactly he did to impress and indoctrinate his simple-minded and initially hostile co-workers.

As we can see, "Won-bo" and "Paper Factory Village" can hardly be defined as thoroughly "Marxian" or "proletarian". Even though they contained huge doses of leftist rhetoric, at his core the author remained true to his earlier traditionalist visions. The stories are filled with Yi's favorite pathetic characters— poor country girls, victims of domestic violence, wretched elderly peasants, and fragile intellectuals. These characters are described with much more authenticity and sympathy than the faceless "progressive" workers or revolutionary activists. The obligatory revolutionary conversions of his traditional heroes remained schematic and largely unmotivated.

Kohyang (Native Land) (1933-1934)

The contradiction between Yi Ki-yŏng's essentially peasant worldview and the alien, borrowed "proletarian" motifs appears fully fledged in his most popular work – the novel *Native Land (Kohyang)* (1933-1934).

The critics generally agreed that the novel was written under the strong influence of Sholokhov's major "agrarian" novels *Quiet Flows the Don (Tihii Don)* and *Virgin Land Under the Plough (Podniataia tselina)*.⁵⁴¹ The North Korean scholar Pak Chong-sik, citing his personal interview with Yi Ki-yŏng, stated: "the month after the first reading of *Quiet Flows the Don* in Japanese translation, Yi Ki-yŏng started to write *Native Land*. He set the goal of maintaining the same perspective on contemporary Korean village life as Sholokhov did on the rural life of the Don region. This was the reason for the strong similarity between the images in both novels".⁵⁴² *Native Land*, like *Quiet Flows the Don*, attempted to constitute a broad panorama of the Korean village in the 1920s and 1930s. The main story-line of the novel can be summarised as follows:

⁵⁴⁰ Ibid., 210.

⁵⁴¹ See *Samch'ŏlli*, 1936, #4, 319. Quoted in V.I. Ivanova, *Li Gien: Zhizn' i tvorchestvo*, 21; Pak Chong-sik, "Chosŏn munhak-e issŏsŏ-ŭi ssobet'ŭ munhak-ŭi yŏngnyang", 432.

⁵⁴² Pak Chong-sik, *Sovremennaia koreiskaia literatura posle osvobozhdenia (formirovanie i stanovlenie sotsrealizma v koreiskoi literature po tvorchestvu Li Giena)*, 141.