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**REVIEW ESSAY**

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# Alternative Modernities for Colonial Korea

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Vladimir Tikhonov. *Modern Korea and Its Others: Perceptions of the Neighbouring Countries and Korean Modernity*. London: Routledge, 2016. 218 pp. $160 (cloth).

Sunyoung Park. *The Proletarian Wave: Literature and Leftist Culture in Colonial Korea, 1910–1945*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2015. 348 pp. $50 (cloth).

It has become a global scholarly undertaking: how to rethink modernity so as to decouple it from Westernization (Chakrabarty 2000). Strategies have included foregrounding the plurality of history to disrupt linear progress; positing non-Western centers of modernity in, say, Moscow or Shanghai; and tracing anticolonial circuits connecting Asia to Africa to Latin America. The two recent books under review here add colonial-era Korea to such far-reaching discussions by situating the country across national boundaries. Interestingly, one connecting thread here is the alternative world system provided by the interwar, Soviet-oriented Left. The result is an unsettling of binaries that subsequently became entrenched during the Cold War: for example, north-south, socialist-nationalist, and, for literature, realist-modernist. But more broadly, pervading both books is the sense that history could have turned out differently—that revisiting northeast Asia's porous borders in the early twentieth century reveals the Korean peninsula's lost, internationalist potential.

This is not immediately apparent in Vladimir Tikhonov's deceptively straightforward study, *Modern Korea and Its Others*. Tikhonov begins with the modest proposition that Korean intellectuals sought models for modernization from foreign Others—not only Western powers but also the country's most proximate neighbors, who are the focus of this book. Drawing from a wide range of newspapers and literary sources, Tikhonov systematically discusses how Korean writers

perceived and were perceived by their counterparts in Russia/the USSR, China, and Japan—each of which seemed to open Asia-specific paths to modernity, but always with baggage attached. Of course, the elephant in the region here is Japan, covered in the book's final part. Tikhonov shows how, before colonization, many Korean thinkers saw in Japan a blueprint for modernization—a blueprint that wasn't simply invalidated after 1910. Instead, Japan became simultaneously model and threat: we learn that even committed anticolonialists like Pak Ŭnsik—briefly president of the Shanghai Provisional Government—acknowledged the "success of Japan's 50-years long cultural borrowing from the West" and deemed it necessary for Korea to follow a similar path (138). As a case in point, Tikhonov notes how the prominent Confucian scholar Hyŏn Sang'yun drew from Tokyo's vibrant intellectual scene in order to articulate a pro–collective individualist stance in 1914. However, a follow-up chapter complicates this promise through a survey of both Japanese and Korean literary works that describe Japanese-Korean mixed marriages, which colonial administrators viewed as a bulwark for pan-Asianism. In the intimate, fraught spaces of these fictionalized marriages, we get a novel take on the insuperable barriers between colonizer and colonized, with Korean wives tending to stand in for a subordinate, feminized Korea. Though Tikhonov shows how several Korean authors (including the prominent nationalist-collaborationist Yi Kwangsu) tried to subvert this hierarchy through their own depictions of mixed marriages, these tended to end with unrequited love or some other such intrigue—the marriages dogged by lingering gender, class, or ethnic divides.

One might expect more harmonious relations with China—the focus of the book's second part—since it was, Tikhonov writes, "the foreign Other closest to Korea" (85): intellectuals in both countries struggled with "how to achieve modernity following the Western or/and Japanese examples without falling prey to Western or/and Japanese imperialist designs" (84). From this common ground emerged a broad range of views toward China—from those who viewed the diminished Middle Kingdom as a negative example to be avoided and/or exploited, to those who found glimmers of inspiration in the late Qing dynasty's promotion of patriotism and experiments with constitutionalism, to those who drew hope from the 1911 revolution only to be disappointed by Sun Yat-sen's seeming indifference, by the 1920s, to the cause of Korean independence. These wide-ranging responses are registered in the ambivalent and at times hostile accounts of China and the Chinese found in Korean newspapers and literature. For instance, an 1896 *Tongnip sinmun*

editorial described Chinese residents in Korea as "leeches" and "bloodsuckers"—language that consciously drew from U.S. policies excluding Chinese immigrants from the United States (91). Accordingly, the "sex-obsessed, immoral Chinese exploiter" was an archetype in colonial Korean literary accounts of Koreans living in China (110). After detailing the anti-Chinese riots that exploded across Korea in 1931, Tikhonov concludes that, while China from afar could be seen as a potential model for world-historical development, Korean interactions with actual Chinese tended to be fraught or worse.

As indicated above, one of Tikhonov's emphases is the international Left, which of course sought to overcome such divides in the name of a liberated humanity. And yet here, too, the results were mixed: in the section on China, we find mutual admiration among Korean and Chinese leftists amid the 1919 March First and May Fourth movements; Koreans joining and fighting for the Chinese Community Party (CCP) in the 1920s and 1930s, and keeping track of author Lu Xun's "left turn" (125); but then, from 1933 to 1936, over a thousand Korean partisans (including Kim Il Sung) were purged from the CCP in Manchuria, under suspicions of being pro-Japanese infiltrators. Turning to the relations between Korean and Japanese leftists, Tikhonov finds more subtle barriers—as seen, for instance, in the interesting mixture of "colonial Orientalism and class- and gender-based solidarity feelings" in the Korea-related writings of the poet Sata Ineko (162). Likewise, in Yŏm Sangsŏp's 1927 novel *Nam Ch'ungsŏ*, the son of a wealthy Korean father and a Japanese mistress finds refuge in a radical underground circle—though even from within this circle he has to acknowledge his comrades' enduring Korean nationalism and his mother's ardent wish to return to Japan. In short, Korean, Japanese, and Chinese leftists arrived at a limited internationalism marked by a multiplicity of feelings—combinations of sympathy and paternalism, hope and disappointment.

This leads me to Tikhonov's first, longest, and most revelatory part, on Russia and the Soviet Union—headquarters of the Communist International and, thus, a key starting point for that leftist thread. Even prior to the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, Russia was long seen as distinct from Western powers; it was "an Oriental occident"—proximate to, and indeed part of, Asia. This did not temper the Russian Empire's aggressively imperialist designs on Korea, which, as Tikhonov shows, led several Koreans to cheer Japan's victory in the Russo-Japanese War. Attitudes changed after 1917 and the emergence, in the 1920s and 1930s, of the Soviet Union as the only world power

willing to champion Korean independence. Tikhonov describes the active participation of Korean communists in the Comintern and the training many received at Moscow's Communist University of the Toilers of the East, as well as how, back in Korea, "enthusiasm for Stalinist socio-economical miracles engulfed most of the intellectual establishment and not only its progressive segment" (33). Tikhonov paints such enthusiasm in sympathetic terms: according to him, pro-Soviet Koreans weren't simply dupes of a foreign power, but "consciously acting in what they considered Korea's best interests" (39). However, he also makes all too clear that, just as with Japan and China, the Soviet Union's alternative path to modernity ultimately proved perilous. During the Stalinist terror, "the majority of the well-known USSR-based Korean Communists were arrested and shot," and in 1937, 171,781 Koreans were deported from the Russian Far East to Central Asia—here again on the premise that they might be actual or potential Japanese infiltrators (23).

Just as in his sections on Japan and China, Tikhonov uses literature to illustrate the ambivalence that followed such disillusioning blows—literature as blurring hard-and-fast national and ideological lines. For example, we learn that Im Hwa, one of the leaders of the Korea Artista Proletaria Federacio (Esperanto for Korean Federation of Proletarian Artists, more on which below), sought Soviet cultural models but also drew inspiration from anti-Soviet Russian writers Leonid Andreev and Boris Savinkov. Accordingly, what draws Tikhonov's interest are Korean writings that disrupt any clear-cut "pro-Soviet/anti-Soviet dichotomy" (52) and in the process underscore northeast Asia's vibrant, often unexpected cultural links. For instance, he shows how, in the 1920s and 1930s, Sergei Esenin's utopian peasant poetry was admired by both Koreans and Japanese, how these poems dovetailed with the Japanese Orientalist theory of "Korea's sad beauty," and thus how, via Russia, "the Orientalizing colonialist gaze dominating the representations of colonized Korea by its masters could be renegotiated and somehow nuanced" (58–59). This potential is more fully spelled out in Tikhonov's moving, groundbreaking overview of Korean writings about the Russian émigré population that fled to or chose to remain in Manchuria after 1917. For instance, Yi Hyosŏk's 1939 novel *The Sorrow of Wanderings* focuses on the Korean tour of a Harbin-based Russian cabaret—"beautiful people reduced to the role of third-rate artists" (71)—including a former Tsarist general's daughter singing *Arirang* in Korean. Tikhonov writes:

> An impoverished blue-eyed Russian woman from Harbin singing the Korean 'song of national grief' (*han*) was perhaps the best symbol of Russia's place on the mental

> map of the Korean intelligentsia of the late 1930s. It was a European country which was—rarely for the West—fully acquainted with the taste of poverty, pain and humiliation so well-known to the colonial subjects of the Japanese Empire." (72)

For Tikhonov, this shared sorrow, which undergirded generally positive depictions of Russians during this period, not only confounded East-West hierarchies in the face of imperialism, but set the stage for the "positive attitude many colonial cultural figures assumed about the Soviet-imposed regime in North Korea after 1945" (80). Harbin Russians as harbingers of Soviet power—it's a suggestive, counterintuitive argument that isn't at all developed, but seems right in light of the blurred boundaries of the region at hand.

What I found most compelling in *Modern Korea and Its Others* were precisely these unexpected encounters and connections. (Another enchanting, albeit also undeveloped thread is about the Tolstoy cult in Korea and Japan.) However, the readings of novels and poems are almost entirely content-based—limited to plot and theme summaries—and some consideration of literary form would, I think, have given the book a less scattershot feel. This is where *The Proletarian Wave* comes in: if Tikhonov broadly documents the uncanny interstices of northeast Asia, Sunyoung Park uses more focused literary readings alongside historical context to nuance our understanding of Korean leftist letters. That is, while Tikhonov complicates our understanding of Korea as a whole by blurring national boundaries, Park complicates our understanding of the Korean Left in particular by blurring the boundaries of literary form. Her by no means exclusive focus is on the abovementioned Korea Artista Proletaria Federacio (KAPF), with the book working to counter two well-established, contradictory dismissals of this group: first, that the KAPF blindly imitated Soviet models at the expense of both national and literary integrity; and second, that the KAPF failed to live up to these same models, remaining mired instead in nationalism and traditionalism.

Park dismantles both positions through a regimented three-part approach. Part 1 of the book provides a historical overview of the Korean Left—from spontaneous peasant and worker movements during the late Chosŏn dynasty to the 1925 founding of the Comintern-recognized Korean Communist Party. Park emphasizes here and throughout her study that, due to Japanese repression, the party was never able to exercise much control over its members or over writers. Thus, rather than a monolith, the Korean Left was "a peculiarly hollow historical bloc, deprived of a strong political core but flourishing overall in both its social and its cultural manifestations" (38). Atop this decentered core, part 2 builds an exhaustive revisionist history of Korean leftist letters,

with an emphasis on the KAPF's multiple sources and ideological strands—not just Marxism, but also anarchism, liberalism, nationalism, and feminism. We learn that anarchist literature was a particularly influential precursor for, rather than deviation from, leftist Korean writing, at least through 1927, when the KAPF—in line with Comintern directives—expelled its anarchist members and later severed its ties to an allied nationalist organization. However, Park asserts that these consolidations didn't simply plant the seeds for the KAPF's demise, as has been widely argued, but may in fact have been symptoms of growth—of writers productively "struggling with the need to translate the European-born tenets of Marxism for their application to the local social reality of colonial Korea" (68). Accordingly, Park devotes an entire chapter to efforts to introduce historical materialism and an accompanying materialist aesthetic to what was still an overwhelmingly agrarian society. For example, we learn that KAPF writers embraced both Lukácsian realism and a style of reportage similar to that promoted by Walter Benjamin and the Soviet futurist Sergei Tret'iakov. There's no mention of Georg Lukács's disapproval of Tret'iakov's reportage, but Park adds that, due to sociopolitical constraints and the demands of anti-imperial struggle, realism necessarily looked different in Korea than it did in the USSR. As we learn in part 3 (which fills in the context provided by parts 1 and 2 with case studies and close readings of individual authors), the KAPF came to eschew socialist realism—that is, "Soviet-style, heroic representation of class struggle crowned by the triumph of the proletariat" (238)—in favor of faithful depictions of "existing discrepancies" and vernacular languages (137).

Interestingly, through such efforts to nuance our understanding of the Korean Left, Park moves beyond northeast Asia and the Soviet Union, and explicitly taps into a broader revisionist tradition represented by such Americanists as Michael Denning, Barbara Foley, and Paula Rabinowitz—like Park, scholars of interwar leftist letters who have emphasized local context in order to downplay top-down, center-periphery control. This body of scholarship has pressed for a more inclusive and flexible view of the literary Left as not simply beholden to Soviet directives, but instead open to women, minorities, and a multiplicity of progressive causes. Thus, Park uses form and aesthetics to connect Korean leftist literature to counterparts worldwide—not just in the Soviet Union, China, and Japan, but also in the United States. For instance, she detects in KAPF writer Yi Kiyŏng's depiction of mothers killing their infant children ("the pathetic corpses of the youngest children resembling hairless newborn birds") what Denning, in his monumental study of 1930s

American culture, calls "the proletarian grotesque"—shocking depictions of poverty intended to jolt readers from complacency (129). Accordingly, we learn in a later chapter that poor mothers forced to endure "their family's ruin, especially the death or withering away of their children" (216) was a recurring theme in 1930s Korean women's writing. In particular, Park uses close and deeply contextualized readings of Kang Kyŏngae's *Salt* and *The Human Predicament* to show how the mother figure pushed the boundaries of feminist and socialist literature alike. Kang's writings simultaneously recast women's work as proletarian exploitation, departed from the autonomous individual of classic feminist fiction, and disrupted nationalist, colonial-friendly glorifications of motherhood. In short, here we find a Korean, anti-imperialist iteration of Rabinowitz's "gendered history of 1930s literary radicalism," which in the United States also included the figure of a partisan "great mother."

It's fascinating to see colonial Korean literature as a part of these broader leftist circuits, and Park's rigorous emphasis on local context and, in particular, colonial repression prevents us from losing the trees for the forest. Still, as an Americanist myself and a novice to Korean literature, I was a bit unnerved by how legible many of these texts became—how readily they seemed to fit the frames of revisionist American literary criticism. As a result, I was most drawn to Park's discussions of elusive authors like the leftist nationalist Yŏm Sangsŏp—who was not part of the KAPF, but instead embraced the term "fellow traveler" after hearing it in Tokyo from the Soviet writer Boris Pilnyak (169). Discussing Yŏm's classic 1924 novella *On the Eve of the Uprising*, Park shows how it occupies an interesting gray area between collaboration and anticolonialism: Yŏm adopts the Japanese I-novel confessional narrative, but then transforms it into "the more intersubjective narrative form of a travelogue" (183), providing ethnographic depictions of communal settings. That is, through Yŏm's subtle reworking of an established literary genre (which enabled him to slip under the radar of Japanese censors), he is able to reveal Korea's material plight under colonial domination.

An even more elusive figure is Kim Namch'ŏn, who in the book's final, richest chapter emerges as the KAPF's most accomplished theoretician and writer. Drawing from the Japanese philosopher Tosaka Jun, Kim sought to use everyday, sensual, individual experiences to nuance Marxist progress and to arrive at open-ended understandings of realism. In doing so, he rethought rather than simply affirmed Lukács. As Park writes:

> Kim stressed that a Korean writer should actively educe a sense of the direction of history through close observation of the everyday instead of more passively describing it as a determined outcome of dialectical necessity. Accordingly, while Kim agreed in principle with Lukács about the necessity of representing the totality of everyday reality, in practice he was more inclined to give priority to "everyday" over "totality" in the actual execution of his literary projects. (244)

Thus, while Lukács famously rejected modernist experimentation, championing instead the sprawling realist novels of nineteenth-century Europe, Kim's creative writing occupied an interesting middle ground between modernism and realism. As Park shows in her brilliant discussions of his stories *Green Star Pharmacy* (1939) and *Barley* (1941), Kim's writing is marked by tonal discord, thematic ambivalence, and a quiet malaise that strikes at the heart of Japanese pan-Asianism.[i] What makes Park's discussion so exciting here is that it expands our understanding not just of leftist Korean literature, but of leftist literature as a whole.

However, Park leaves it to others to explore how figures like Kim might serve to reconceptualize key, but typically Western or Soviet-centered, debates surrounding art and politics. For instance, in the famous 1930s exchanges between Lukács and Bertolt Brecht on realism and modernism, would Kim (executed in North Korea in 1953) be aligned with Brecht—or is this too limiting a frame? Considering such questions seems like a natural next step for *The Proletarian Wave*, especially in light of other recent efforts to rethink modernism and realism as a whole from "peripheral," postcolonial, and Asian spaces (Etsy and Lye 2012, Parry 2009, Poole 2014, Shih 2001). Similarly, how Russian and Soviet literature themselves change when viewed from Asia has been a growing topic of interest among Slavists like Katerina Clark (2011), Michael Kunichika (2015), and Harsha Ram (forthcoming). Basically, how does the distinct context of colonial Korea force us to arrive at new, less Western-centric mappings of world literature?

Both Park and Tikhonov stop short of such questions, and interestingly, after situating Korea across national boundaries, each study ends by returning to the nation. As Park notes, colonial-era leftism can be seen as a precursor to the *minjung* [the people('s)] democracy movement of the 1970s and 1980s—*The Proletarian Wave* revealing *minjung* to be both socialist and nationalist, and not just the latter, as is commonly believed. She also suggests that "the acknowledgement of a shared twentieth-century leftist cultural tradition" might prove beneficial to North-South relations (275). Likewise, *Modern Korea* ends with the upsurge of Korean nationalism across the peninsula

after 1945, and with Tikhonov's cautious hope that contemporary South Korea will accommodate foreign cultures and peoples as it steadily grows less homogenous. Ultimately, both authors seem to be in positions similar to many of their subjects—providing glimpses of often utopian, cross-national affiliations, but forced back to the nation by the constraints of history.

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***Note***

1 Helpfully, Park published full-length English translations of *On the Eve* and *Barley* in a 2010 anthology of colonial-era Korean writing.

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