

Competing Authorial Models in the Media-Generated Persona of Chǒng Yǒn-gyu (1899–1979)⁽¹⁾

Pau PITARCH FERNÁNDEZ

Abstract

In 1923 Chǒng Yǒn-gyu (鄭然圭) (1899-1979) became the first Korean author to publish fiction in Japanese in the metropolis. Chǒng's melodramatic fiction has been forgotten by the canon, but his works and the media presentation of the writings and writer provide a very interesting set of materials to ponder the coexistence of competing authorial models in 1920s. His publisher's advertising copy took an ethnic approach, emphasizing Chǒng's essentially Korean sensibility. Leading proletarian writers like Maedakō Hiroichirō (1888-1957) praised him as a testimony for colonial oppression and an example of the budding exchanges between Korean and Japanese leftist thinkers in an internationalist conception of what the proletarian artistic movement should be. Parallel to these two configurations of his authorial persona, Chǒng portrayed himself as a cosmopolitan humanist, explicitly distancing himself from ethnic or national markers, and from specific ideological labels. While some of Chǒng's choices in self-presentation may be explained by a wariness of political persecution, I argue that a more important factor was his attempt to position himself within a third aesthetic-ideological strain, namely that of the "humanist idealism" that had been popularized by some of the best-selling novels in the Japanese literary scene of the early 1920s. Beyond the eventual failure of Chǒng's literary career, the interplay of these varied and contradictory discourses around him and his work offers an invaluable insight into how publishers, critics, and authors in the 1920s conceptualized the question of whose voice could achieve the status of "literary art," where that value ultimately stemmed from, and what authorial personas were available for Korean imperial subjects within the field of modern Japanese literature.

1. Introduction

"A Persecuted Genius Author - His First Work from Exile

A World-Class Masterpiece!

A Great Revolution in the World of Thought!

The Truth of Humanity!"⁽²⁾

Such was the exaggerated praise bestowed upon the novel *The Wanderer's Sky*⁽³⁾ by Chǒng Yǒn-gyu⁽⁴⁾ (1899-1979) by an oversized advertisement that took up the central part of the first page in the *Asahi shinbun* on February 11, 1923. It was the momentous occasion of the first ethnically Korean author publishing a novel in Japanese in the metropolis. In less than a year, however, Chǒng would all but give up on his literary career. Why was Chǒng's novel so quickly forgotten, and what can literary history glean from a look at how he was presented and represented in contemporary media at the time of his debut? What competing discourses were deployed in this process, and what do they tell us about how literary authorship was conceptualized in 1920s Japan, especially for Korean subjects of

(1) This research was made possible with the support of the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science through Kakenhi project "Beyond Genius: Gender, Ethnicity and Authorship in the Modern Japanese Literary Field" (Grant number: JP21K12932).

(2) *Asahi shinbun*, February 11, 1923, morning edition, p.1. All translations are mine except where otherwise indicated.

(3) *Sasurai no sora*. Senden-sha, 1923.

(4) 鄭然圭. 정연규. His Japanese-speaking contemporaries would have referred to him as "Tei Zenkei," following the Japanese reading of the characters that make up his name.

the Empire?

Chŏng Yŏn-gyu is a name that generally does not make it into histories of Japanese literature. Even in specialized monographs about the literary production of Japan's Korean community he is little more than a footnote or a simple sentence like "The first Korean writer to appear in the Japanese literary scene was Chŏng Yŏn-gyu."⁽⁵⁾ Some of his short stories have been reprinted in specialized anthologies,⁽⁶⁾ but his almost complete disappearance from the historical narrative may have to do mostly with his ideological about-face in the mid-1920s. Even though he had originally arrived in Japan as an exile, driven out of the Korean Peninsula for his involvement with the pro-independence movement, Chŏng became an ardent supporter of the Japanese Empire. A key incident in this change seems to have been Chŏng's experience of the indiscriminate anti-Korean violence perpetrated by vigilante groups in the aftermath of the Great Kantō Earthquake of September 1st, 1923. After that, Chŏng seems to have concluded that the only way for Koreans to survive within the Japanese Empire was to wholeheartedly embrace the imperial cause, and he redirected all his creative efforts toward that goal.⁽⁷⁾

After his ideological conversion, Chŏng gave up completely on his literary and artistic ambitions, and reinvented himself as a sort of expert in Korean and North-East Asian matters with a clear imperialist agenda. He edited the pan-Asianist journal *The Times of Manchuria and Mongolia*,⁽⁸⁾ and penned both technical volumes like *Policies for the Capitalist Production of Rice in Korea*,⁽⁹⁾ and pro-imperial propaganda pamphlets like *The Theory of the Imperial Way*.⁽¹⁰⁾ He remained in Japan after 1945 and would not make his way back to the Korean Peninsula until the 1960s.⁽¹¹⁾ In an interesting last twist to his public persona, there are reports of Chŏng turning up in 1962 at the Cultural Affairs Division of the Seoul Metropolitan Office of Education to be the first person entered in their newly started Register of Cultural Personalities (*munhwa-in*) as a persecuted pro-independence writer during the colonial period.⁽¹²⁾

Incidentally, each in their own way, Chŏng's children became public figures of the Korean community in Japan. Even though Chŏng's wife Saitō Ai (1909-2003) had been born of Japanese parents in Iwate Prefecture, and had thus always been a Japanese citizen, she lost her citizenship together with her children in 1952. As she had been transferred to her husband's family register upon marriage, she was tied to his fate after the Treaty of San Francisco, and in order to remain in Japan had to become a "special permanent resident" (*tokubetsu eijūsha*) together with the rest of the family. Although they had lived apart from each other for a long time, she only re-naturalized Japanese in 1985, after Chŏng's death. Chŏng's son Tei Taikin⁽¹³⁾ has become a well-known public intellectual who advocates for the naturalization of Koreans in Japan. Chŏng's daughter Chŏng Hyangkyun,⁽¹⁴⁾ a public servant in the Tokyo area, entered the public spotlight in 1994 when she sued the Tokyo Metropolitan Government for not allowing her to sit

(5) Nakane Takayuki. "Chōsen" *hyōshō no bunkashi: Kindai nihon to tasha o meguru chi no shokuminchika*. Shinchōsha, 2004, p.222. He is mentioned in similar curt terms in Watanabe Kazutami. "Tasha" to shite no Chōsen: *Bungakuteki kōsatsu*. Iwanami shoten, 2003, p.30, and Song Hyewon. *Zainichi Chōsenjin bungakushi no tame ni: Koe naki koe no porifonii*. Iwanami shoten, 2014, p.24. Only Kawamura Minato actually engages with any of Chŏng's writing in his recent *Kakyō to shite no bungaku: Nihon, Chōsen bungaku no kōsaro*. Hōsei daigaku shuppankyoku, 2022. Other major histories of the culture of Koreans in Japan ignore him altogether like Yoon Keun Cha's chapter "Zainichi Chōsenjin no bungaku (1): Shokuminchi jidai" in *Zainichi no seishinshi 1: Tonichi, kaihō, bundan no kioku*. Iwanami shoten, 2015, pp.68-91.

(6) Ōmura Masuo and Hotei Toshihiro (eds.). *Kindai Chōsen bungaku Nihongo sakuhinshū 1901-1938: Sōsaku*. Ryokuin shobō, 2004.

(7) For a detailed analysis of Chŏng's post-Kantō-Earthquake piece "Visiting the Bones of Compatriots" ("Dōhō no ikotsu o tazunete") see Haag, Andre. "The Passing Perils of Korean Hunting: Zainichi Literature Remembers the Kantō Earthquake Korean Massacres." *Azalea: Journal of Korean Literature & Culture*. Volume 12, 2019, pp.257-299. For a look at Chŏng's particular brand of imperialist ideological proclamations see Kawamura Minato. *Kakyō to shite no bungaku*, pp.269-273.

(8) *Man-mō jidai*, launched in 1932.

(9) *Chōsen kome shihonshugi seisan taisaku*. Man-Mō jidai sha, 1936.

(10) *Kōdō riron-shū*. Kōgakukai, 1942.

(11) For the biographical information regarding Chŏng's life here and elsewhere in this paper, I follow his son Tei Taikin's volume *Zainichi no taerarenai karusa (The Unbearable Lightness of Zainichi)*. Chūōkōron-shinsha, 2006.

(12) *Dong-A ilbo*, June 27, 1962.

(13) 鄭大均. Born in 1948. He used to go by the Korean name Chŏng Daekyun (정대균) before he naturalized Japanese in 2004.

(14) 鄭香均, 정향균 (1950-2019). Unlike her brother Taikin, she never naturalized Japanese.

an exam for a managerial position on the account that she was not a Japanese national. After an initial favorable ruling by the Tokyo High Court, the Japanese Supreme Court finally ruled against her suit in 2005.⁽¹⁵⁾

Coming back to Chōng as a writer, from our present aesthetic point of view it is not surprising that his fiction has been forgotten by the canon. His overemotional melodrama was not rare in the popular fiction of the time, but it has not made itself a place in the historical narrative as a model for good writing. What makes Chōng a particularly interesting case for literary history is how his media presence highlights the coexistence in the Japan of his time of multiple authorial models, multiple ways of conceptualizing and presenting his value as a writer to the Japanese public: some based on his ethnic representativeness, others on his ability to provide testimony for the cruelty of Japanese imperialism and colonization, and yet some others on his individual sensibility as a tortured genius with universalist humanist and idealistic ambitions. All are intertwined, sometimes in self-contradictory ways, in his public persona, and offer interesting glimpses into the many competing discourses that circulated in the early 1920s about whose voice could achieve the status of “literary art,” and where that value ultimately stemmed from. For, as Pierre Bourdieu reminds us “the field of cultural production is the site of struggles in which what is at stake is the power to impose the dominant definition of the writer and therefore to delimit the population of those entitled to take part in the struggle to define the writer.”⁽¹⁶⁾ It was in the process of qualifying Chōng’s qualities as an “author” that different actors gave shape to the very conception of “author” in their contemporary literary world.

In order to understand how these authorial models were deployed and circulated it is important to look not only at Chōng’s literary output but also at its paratexts: both its “peritexts” (to use Gérard Genette’s well-known classification), in this case author-written pre- and postfaces, as well as its “public epitexts,” that is advertisings, reviews and interviews produced for public circulation.⁽¹⁷⁾ All these texts and paratexts interact in the presentation of “Chōng Yōn-gyu, author” not in the purely referential sense (it is not that they just point to Chōng Yōn-gyu the person as an external stable and independent entity), but in the sense that they make “Chōng Yōn-gyu, author” present and possible within the particular system of multimedia practices of reading mediated by writers, publishers, critics and readers in 1920s Japan. In this sense it is useful to think of “Chōng Yōn-gyu, author” in the sense proposed by John Frow of a “variable function,” a product “of determinate practices of reading, produced by, not given for, interpretation.”⁽¹⁸⁾ That is, the particular qualities of the many versions of “Chōng Yōn-gyu, author” were made possible by how his readers and critics, and Chōng himself, were willing to find a space for him within their particular ideologically-inflected model of who got to be an author and on the basis of what. In the process of explaining the value of Chōng’s works, they were simultaneously carving up a particular space for a specific notion of “literary value” within the 1920s Japanese literary system, as well as precluding some modes of authorial identity while privileging others.

2. Chōng Yōn-gyu’s Background and Debut in Japan

Chōng Yōn-gyu was born in the south-eastern province of Kyōngsangnam-do in 1899. His father had studied in Japan from 1904 to 1906, and after annexation became a public servant within the Government-General of Korea. Two of his brothers studied at the Imperial University in Tokyo, and his eldest brother became an important figure within the Forestry Department of the colonial government. Chōng’s family moved to Seoul (known then as Hansōng, and later as Keijō under Japanese rule) quite early in his life, and he received most of his basic education there. While a student at Keijō Senshū Gakkō, Chōng participated in the 1919 March 1st Movement, a series of demonstrations against Japanese rule. His name is recorded in police interrogation records of the time as a pro-independence activist.⁽¹⁹⁾

(15) “Tōkyōto kanrishoku shiken no sotokokuseki kyōhi wa gōken. Genkoku ga gyakuten haiso. Saikōsai” *Asahi shinbun*, January 27, 2005, morning edition, p.1.

(16) Bourdieu, Pierre. *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*. (tr. Richard Nice) New York: Columbia University Press, 1993, p.42.

(17) Genette, Gérard. *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*. (tr. Jane E. Lewin) Cambridge University Press, 1997.

(18) Frow, John. *Marxism and Literary History*. Harvard University Press, 1986, p.185.

(19) These records are reproduced in Tei Taikin. *Zainichi no taerarenai karusa*. Chūōkōron-shinsha, 2006, pp.112-113.

Chŏng had been active as a writer since his student years. In 1921 he published two novels: *Spirit*⁽²⁰⁾ and *Utopia*.⁽²¹⁾ The latter was a “future history” set in 2023, in the vein of Edward Bellamy’s classic of utopian writing *Looking Backward: 2000–1887* (1888). Chŏng’s writings and pro-independence activism caught the eye of the colonial authorities, and he was promptly banned from publishing in Korea in 1921, and later outright expelled from the Peninsula the following year.⁽²²⁾

Far from being impeded by his exile, Chŏng’s literary career experienced an unprecedented burst after he settled in Japan in 1922. In 1923 he publishes the novel *The Wanderer’s Sky* and the short-story collection *The Agony of Life*,⁽²³⁾ both from a small publisher headed by Adachi Daisuke, nephew of journalist and social critic Adachi Kenchū (1857-1930).⁽²⁴⁾ Additionally, his story “Mitsuko’s Life” appears in the left-leaning journal *Liberation*,⁽²⁵⁾ and “The Night before the Bloody Battle” is collected in the anthology of proletarian writings *Arts Front: A Collection of 29 Authors of Emergent Literature*.⁽²⁶⁾

Chŏng’s works all share the same histrionic over-the-top style. There are long soliloquies, dramatic proclamations, and frenzied appeals to Destiny and God. Chŏng deploys exclamation points and ellipses liberally in order to maintain a sustained emotional high tone in which everything is a matter of life or death. He is careful, however, to avoid any direct allusions to the political situation within the Japanese Empire or the colonies, and the instances of self-censorship through redacted passages covered with *fuseji* are relatively rare. Most of the dramatic conflicts his writings explore are developed in an abstract, idealized level of big ideas.

His story “The Night before the Bloody Battle,” for instance, is set in Korea in an unspecified year (although the fact that Seoul is referred to as Hansŏng may hint that it happens at some point during the late 19th or early 20th century). The setting is the night before a battle in the capital during an undetermined war, and the story follows the mental anguish of an officer who is contemplating the necessity of sending his men into what will most probably be a suicide attack against enemy positions. Neither the opposition nor the side of the protagonist are characterized in any way, although the protagonist’s soldiers all have Korean names. The tone of the text is melodramatic to excess, full of sighing and rhetorical screaming, manly tears and banners drenched in blood. At one point, the officer’s second in command exclaims: “Shoot me with this pistol! That will serve as the signal for all units to attack!” (567). Nothing in the text indicates that the reader should read this ridiculous proclamation in anything other than an earnest manner. More than on the ideological or political reasons for the fighting, the story focuses on the mental state of the officer agonizing over the impending death that his men will face because of the only orders that are left for him to give them.

The tales in *The Agony of Life* share the tone and style of “The Night before the Bloody Battle,” but their themes are more focused on individuals’ stories. In “The Sick Maiden” (“Yameru otome”), for instance, a young girl sick with neurasthenia (*shinkei suijaku*) observes the lushness and vigor of the natural scenery outside her house, frustrated by her reclusion. In “Choked Tears” (“Musebu namida”), a foreign exile finds himself at an inn, remembering how he had to leave his family behind when he was expelled from his country. The story ends with the protagonist crying bitterly as he is moved by the happy reunion at the end of the day of the family that lives in the house in front of his lodgings. “A Suicide’s Memorandum” (“Jisatsusha no shuki”) is a long diatribe against an undetermined second person plural (*kimira*): “Why do you bind me and oppress me with your knowledge and your science?” The identity of this “you” is never explicitly stated, but they are described as a de-humanizing force: “You

⁽²⁰⁾ *Hon* (魂). Hansŏng tosŏ, 1921.

⁽²¹⁾ *Isangch'on* (理想村). Hansŏng tosŏ, 1921.

⁽²²⁾ For the systematic repression of Korean students and intellectuals during the imperial period, see “The Enemy Within: Students and Radicals” in Weiner, Michael. *Race and Migration in Imperial Japan*. Routledge, 2013, pp. 63-93. For the activities of the special “Korean Affairs” division of the imperial Special Police (*tokkō keisatsu*) see Ogino Fujio. *Tokkō keisatsu*. Iwanami shoten, 2012, pp.30-31.

⁽²³⁾ *Sei no modae*. Senden-sha, 1923.

⁽²⁴⁾ The databases of the National Diet Library give a total of five results for Senden-sha as a publisher, from 1921 to 1923. Chŏng’s books appear to be the last ever published under that label.

⁽²⁵⁾ “Mitsuko no sei.” *Kaihō*, August 1923.

⁽²⁶⁾ Nakanishi Inosuke (ed.). *Geijutsu sensen: Shinkō bungaku 29nin-shū*. Shizensha, 1923.

treat humans like animals. Classify them by shape, race, and type, like zoologists. [...] You see them like mechanical beings, but don't recognize a soul in them. They are like dolls made of wood, of stone, of celluloid and rubber.” The aware reader may have been able to read in these lines a condemnation of the brutal policies of resource extraction imposed by an imperial power on their colonized subjects.

The most explicitly political text in *The Agony of Life* might be “The Discarded Corpse” (“Suterareta shikabane”). On the train from Seoul to Pusan, a long-haired man dressed in rags suddenly tries to jump outside. He is prevented from committing suicide by his fellow passengers, and gets off at Taegu on a whim. The police stop him, detain him for two days and torture him (or at least that is what seems to be implied by a heavily censored passage), before sending him on his way again. The rest of the story is taken up by a lengthy monologue addressing God about the misery of the human condition, until the epilogue of the text shows the corpse of the man abandoned in Namdaemun (Seoul) on March 1, 1919. Even though the text does not establish an explicit causal connection, the day of the protagonist's death is a clear reference to the March 1 independence movement in which, as mentioned earlier, Chŏng had participated. In his dialogues with the police, the protagonist does indeed make some oblique comments that could be interpreted as political criticisms of colonial oppression: “[Policeman] Damn! Are you insane? / [Protagonist] Yes, I'm insane! That's the truth! How could I not be!?” or later “[Policeman] Who are you? / [Protagonist] I'm a Human Being! All humans fall like this! God! Please, God!” At any rate, a lot is left to the reader's imagination for what might remain unsaid, why the police are so cruel to the main character, or what is the particular situation that has driven him out of his mind. The monologues by the main character, however, remain at a more abstract existential level, focusing on issues like the fatality of death.

The protagonist of *The Wanderer's Sky*, a novel set in Seoul, is a poet called Yi who looks much like the main character in “Suterareta shikabane,” dressed in rags, with long unkempt hair, but avoids his dramatic end. There is no significant plot to speak of, in terms of dramatic events, and the overwhelming majority of the book's five hundred and twenty-three pages are devoted to Yi's musings about life, death, God, “human society,” the evils of “material civilization” and the like. Yi's main motivation is purportedly his love for Mary Grankel, a German woman who returns his affection, but with whom he cannot consummate their love out of a desire to remain spiritually pure. Other than a surprisingly frank letter that she writes to Yi at the end, reminding him that human beings are subject to physical needs as well as spiritual ones, Mary is more of a ghostly figure that the protagonist can remember and call to in the middle of his tirades. He certainly spends more pages discussing philosophical and religious topics with her father, than having any substantive conversations with her.

As I hope is clear from my brief presentation of Chŏng's 1923 literary output, I have no difficulty understanding why his works have not been accorded a place in the annals of Japanese literary history, and nothing is further from my intention that suggesting that they should be recovered as models of literary writing. That being said, when one considers his works as a component of a larger multi-media event that could be labelled “Chŏng Yŏn-gyu: First Korean Writer in Japanese,” and which includes not only his works of creative fiction, but also the journalistic and advertising copy produced around them, an interesting picture of competing narratives circulated around the author emerges. Chŏng thus appears as a media-generated persona that is well worth examining to consider what discourses could be deployed in 1920s Japan to argue for the value of a literary text, and of its creator.

3. Narratives around Chŏng Yŏn-gyu's Media-Created Persona

3.1 Chŏng Yŏn-gyu as the Voice of his Nation/Class

The first thread in this media-generated authorial persona is immediately apparent in the February 11, 1923 first-page advertisement on the *Asahi shinbun* for *The Wanderer's Sky* that I mentioned above:

“A Persecuted Genius Author - His First Work from Exile

A World-Class Masterpiece!

A Great Revolution in the World of Thought!

The Truth of Humanity!

Korea's three-thousand-year history of despotism and tyranny has produced such a thought and such a work.

The author's previous works all provoked the wrath of the Government-General of Korea, and were all destroyed or confiscated. Here finally can you see his thought in its complete form. His bold originality, the depth and skill of his style, his absolutely inimitable quality, make him a miracle in today's literary scene.

A great novel that curses the hideousness of materialistic society with its piercing criticism."

The copy from this advertisement emphasizes Chōng's exile condition, calling him a "persecuted genius," and noting how his writings in Korean had all been censored by the Government-General. The ultimate source of his "world-class masterpiece" however is not located in his personal political struggle with the colonial authorities, but is assigned to "Korea's three-thousand-year history of despotism and tyranny." There is no explicit mention of what exactly "provoked the wrath of the Government-General of Korea," or of Chōng's participation in the March 1 Movement and their specific political demands. Chōng's work is thus presented as the result of his people's history in an abstract sense, and given implicit value as a testimony of that long history of oppression. Giving that history a range of three thousand years is effectively a way of obscuring the specificity of the colonial rule that had expelled the writer from his homeland, and equating Chōng's persona with his ethnicity, as the only constant through thirty centuries of very different social, political and economic systems, all reduced to a sense of "Korean experience of oppression." For all the claims of a "bold originality" and "inimitable quality," he is ultimately presented as the mouthpiece for that trans-historical experience of the Korean people.

This authorial narrative centered on Chōng's ethnicity is adopted as well, albeit in a class- and colonial-inflected version, by the proletarian critics that supported him in his debut. It is worth paying attention to the anthology *Arts Front: A Collection of 29 Authors of Emergent Literature* in which Chōng's story "The Night before the Bloody Battle" was published. Edited by Nakanishi Inosuke (1893-1958),⁽²⁷⁾ the volume had been put together as a show of support for social activist Sakai Toshihiko (1871-1933), who had been imprisoned as co-founder of the Japanese Communist Party together with dozens of other leftist activists.⁽²⁸⁾ The anthology included works by major well-known authors affiliated with or sympathetic towards leftist political movements such as Arishima Takeo, Eguchi Kan, Matsumoto Junzō, Ogawa Mimei, Ozaki Shirō and Hirabayashi Hatsunosuke, among many others. Although there is no mention of the fact in the book, Chōng is interestingly the only non-metropolitan author included therein.

Nakanishi may have been acquainted with Chōng from the time he had lived in Korea as a journalist in the late 1910s. His investigative journalism there even earned him time in jail, as punishment for denouncing the dangerous working conditions of coal miners. Nakanishi would later publish several novels about his experience in Korea such as *Sprouts from Red Earth*,⁽²⁹⁾ or *Behind You*,⁽³⁰⁾ as well as short stories like "Unruly Koreans."⁽³¹⁾ He would also later be part of the foundation of the Korean Artist Proletarian Federation (KAPF) in Seoul, on August 17, 1925.

A more detailed look at the proletarian understanding of Chōng's value as an author can be gleaned from a four-part series of articles under the title "The Recent Work of Korean Author Mr. Chōng" published in the *Asahi*

⁽²⁷⁾ For the role of Nakanishi in getting together the group of writers that eventually formed KAPF (Korea Artista Proleta Federatio) see Park Sunyoung, *The Proletarian Wave: Literature and Leftist Culture in Colonial Korea, 1910-1945*, Harvard University Asia Center, 2015, p.56-57. On the general connections of Nakanishi with Korea and Korean writers see especially the following. "Chihō nōson to shokuminchi no kyōkai: Nakanishi Inosuke *Akatsuchi ni megumu mono* to nōmin bungaku no disukūru" in Nakane Takayuki. "Chōsen" *hyōshō no bunkashi: Kindai nihon to tasha o meguru chi no shokuminchika*. Shinchōsha, 2004, p.179-206. Arkenstone, Quillon. "Nakanishi Inosuke and Chungso Ijijo: Realism and Authenticity in Early Proletarian Literature." *Cross-Curvents: East Asian History and Culture Review*. Volume 6, Number 1, May 2017, pp.236-261. Haag, Andre. *Fear and Loathing in Imperial Japan: The Cultures of Korean Peril, 1919-1923*. PhD dissertation. Stanford University, 2013. Haag, Andre. 2011. "Nakanishi Inosuke to Taishō-ki Nihon no 'futei Senjin' e no manazashi: Taishū disukūru to koroniaru genzetsu no tenpuku." *Ritsumeikan gengo bunka kenkyū*, 22 (3): 81-97.

⁽²⁸⁾ On the process of putting together the anthology see Suda Hisami "Saikō Tane maku hito no koro no Kaneko Yōbun" p.237-238] "Tane maku hito" Kenshōkai (ed.), *Tane maku hito no shatei: 100-nen no jikū o koete*. Akita sakigake shinpōsha, 2022.

⁽²⁹⁾ *Akatsuchi ni megumu mono*. Kaizōsha, 1922

⁽³⁰⁾ *Nanjira no haigo yori*. Kaizōsha, 1923

⁽³¹⁾ "Futei senjin." *Kaizō*, September 1922

shinbun from July 19 to 22 by Maedakō Hiroichirō (1888-1957).⁽³²⁾ Maedakō was a leading figure in the budding proletarian literature movement of the early 1920s, a founding member of journals *The Sower* (*Tane maku hito*) and *Literary Front* (*Bungei sensen*). Maedakō describes Chōng as having “long hair, bright eyes,” and being “very sociable, unlike a regular Japanese young writer.” As if he were the incarnation of one of his protagonists, Chōng is portrayed as “draped in the air of a wanderer who has lived through persecution and contempt,” who “like Eugene Sue’s *Wandering Jew* (*Le juif errant*, 1844),” he adds later, “lives an ascetic impoverished life wherever he goes.” Unlike his characters, however, Chōng is not described as overly emotional. Actually, Maedakō compares him to another Korean “literary youth” who his group of Proletarian artists had met, who had wept in such an exaggerated manner that they had suspected him of being a spy of the colonial government. Compared to his histrionic compatriot, Chōng felt “calm but deep as a volcano, within which the spirit of class struggle burns constantly.” Later, he develops the same idea in the following way: “Chōng is a serious writer. Unlike some of the new writers, who force this seriousness into their plots or expression, Chōng’s seriousness comes from his rebelliousness against the extreme oppression of the colonial government.”

In his evaluation of Chōng’s work, Maedakō tends to highlight his Korean-ness as a defining factor. Chōng’s accent when speaking Japanese is characterized as “a bit odd,” but he is still described as being able to express himself “in the sorrowful sentimental tones characteristic of his persecuted race.” Some of Maedakō’s praise betrays even colonial prejudices: “His fluent Japanese writing, one would even say too eloquent, is a mark of his cosmopolitanism.” Nearly every feature of his writings is ultimately connected back to his shared experience with the Korean people. Maedakō connects his motivation for writing his novel with his “drinking tears of indignation at the oppression of his compatriots,” and while acquiescing that Chōng might be morbidly obsessed with death and pessimistic ideas about the futility of human life, Maedakō claims that this pessimism stems from “the spurs of the mounted police, and the machine guns of the border police that only in the metropole (*naichi*) one cannot hear.” Chōng’s voice is thus valuable as a testimony of that experience of violent oppression that is otherwise inaccessible to the metropolitan reader.

It is not a coincidence that both Nakanishi and Maedakō would be interested in welcoming a figure like Chōng’s into the forming field of Proletarian literature. They both had had extensive experiences abroad,⁽³³⁾ and saw international solidarity as one of the main guiding principles of Proletarian art. Their commitment to incorporating this international dimension to Japan’s Proletarian scene guided their reading of Chōng’s work, interpreting his characters’ existential tirades almost as national allegories in which Chōng works as a mouthpiece for the Korean people and their experience of class and national oppression. It is interesting, however, that even in his clearly sympathetic appraisal of Chōng, Maedakō cannot help but create a sense of Korean-ness as the “marked” experience, ascribing Chōng’s “sorrowful sentimental tones” to his ethnicity (“characteristic of his persecuted race”), but granting him a “cosmopolitan” value because he is able to speak Japanese with enough fluency.

Kawamura Minato attempts to read Chōng as part of a nascent internationalist proletarian movement, and sees in his fiction “an expression of the desperate feelings of an ideological convert (*tenkōsha*) [...] who has abandoned the proletarian movement.”⁽³⁴⁾ Besides the basic issue of chronology (Chōng’s political conversion took place after all his fiction had already been published, so it seems difficult to claim that his literary writings are a consequence of something that had yet to happen), I believe there is a more interesting way of looking at Chōng’s fiction as yet a third claim to “authorship” that does not rely on his quality as a mouthpiece for his ethnicity or his class. It is less that Chōng’s literary writings were born out of a sense of guilt towards the proletarian movement he abandoned (if he was ever actually part of it), and more that they constituted a new attempt to carve up a space for himself as a

⁽³²⁾ On Nakanishi and Maedako’s role in the proletarian media of the 1920s, see Ōwada Shigeru. *Shakai undō to bungei zasshi: Tane maku hito jidai no media senryaku*. Seishidō, 2012. On the reception of *The sower* in Korea see Yi Sukyōng “Kankoku ni okeru *Tane maku hito* kōsatsu” p.57-74] “Tane maku hito” Kenshōkai (ed.), *Tane maku hito no shatei: 100-nen no jikū o koete*. Akita sakigake shinpōsha, 2022.

⁽³³⁾ I have already mentioned Nakanishi’s ties with Korea and Korean proletarian writers. Maedakō spent 1907-1920 in the United States, and wrote extensively on the plight of Japanese migrants there.

⁽³⁴⁾ *Kakyō to shite no bungaku*, p.267.

writer beyond ethnic or national labels adopting the persona of a cosmopolitan humanist.

3.2 Chōng Yōn-gyu as Tortured Cosmopolitan Genius

When read against his publisher's advertising copy, and the praises of his Japanese proletarian colleagues, Chōng's own words hint at an alternative mode of self-presentation as an author. The same February 11, 1923 ad on the *Asahi shinbun* quoted above includes some words from the writer himself that seem to seek to transcend his national origin and political circumstances into a more abstract level of humanist concern. The quote from the author reads:

"I have denied all material civilization and material revolution. Those have no benefit for the existence of Humanity. They devour Humanity's life [*seimei*]. Because of that I have also denied the art that pursues them. I just struggle and suffer thinking about how Humanity should live. I am fasting to atone for the agony of the sin that my book has been published thanks to the power of material civilization."

Chōng appears to try to transcend the very ideological conflicts that give his work value in the eyes of his Proletarian supporters, by denying both "material civilization" (capitalism) and "material revolution," and consequently any connection of his work to them ("I have also denied the art that pursues them"). The irony of claiming to deny all connection with "material civilization" on an advertisement for a book being sold as a commodity is not lost on the author, who claims with characteristic dramatics to fast "to atone for the agony of the sin" that in order to bring his thought to Humanity he has needed to rely on the same "material civilization" that "devours Humanity's life."

The peritexts that accompany *The Wanderer's Sky* actually include a similar performative disavowal of the "material" quality of his work, both in the opening quote:

"Art is not a parlor trick.
A Novel is not a doll.
Just like God created man
So does man express God."

And in the post-script:

"As the day to bring the manuscript to the printers approached I was suddenly assailed by doubt, and destroyed my old manuscript. Terrified, fighting with my morbid suffering (*byōku*), I rewrote this book in less than a week.

Exhausted, I find myself anew convalescent in bed.
I have been expelled, and forced to wander every day.
I shall continue my endless wandering.
I apologize for the trouble I have brought my publisher and my editor."

I have no other data to assess the veracity of the story about destroying and re-writing the manuscript in a matter of days, but it is significant that Chōng felt the need to add this self-mythologizing snippet to the end of his novel, emphasizing how the source of the text goes back to his "morbid suffering," pre-empting any accusations of artificiality or theatrics by presenting the work as the result of a handful of days of furious writing for which he paid with his own health. This glorification of mental and physical suffering as a source of artistic creativity matches the myth of the "genius as madman" that circulated widely in Taishō-era Japan as a defining mark of a proper modern artistic sensibility.⁽³⁵⁾

⁽³⁵⁾ For the development and circulation of this "artistic genius as madman" myth in early-20th-century Japan see my dissertation: Pitarch Fernández, Pau. *Cultivated Madness: Aesthetics, Psychology and the Value of the Author in Early 20th-Century Japan*. PhD dissertation. Columbia University, 2015.

A January 9, 1923 *Yomiuri shinbun* feature gives Chōng ample space to perform his particular brand of tortured humanist ascetic artist. The article qualifies him as “the first Korean to publish a novel in Japanese,” and is not beyond some implicit racist comments like “he has been praised for his uncommon talent as a Korean,” but focuses especially on his ascetic appearance. Illustrated by a picture in which Chōng’s facial hair blends into the black background, the piece describes him as somebody who “lives like a hermit (*senjin*), without shaving his beard or cutting his hair,” dressed in plain black robes. His editor Adachi Daisuke wonders how “Mr. Chōng wrote a novel about “love” even though he leads a hermit life without knowing the taste of money.” The emphasis on rejecting “material civilization” is consistent with the author’s self-presentation elsewhere, and even with the characteristic visuals of his male protagonists (unkempt hair, careless presentation).

Chōng’s direct quotes are here even more explicit in rejecting the ethnically-derived value attributions of Proletarian critics: “I find in myself no trace of ethnic thinking (*minzokuteki na kangae*) in terms of Japan is like this or like that to Korea. To me there are no borders or territories. [...] I am no socialist, anarchist or communist. I just preach the love of Humankind, but somehow that gives the mistaken impression that I follow one of those ideologies.” Again, the language of Humanistic Cosmopolitanism allows Chōng to circumvent questions about his positioning vis-a-vis the political situation of Korea under Japanese colonization. Part of it may have been an instinct of self-preservation after having been expelled from his native land by the Government-General, but it seems like going as far as denying any “ethnic thinking” or the reality of “borders or territories” goes beyond an understandable circumspection about calling attention upon himself with explicit comments about the evils of colonialism, and signals an active attempt to build for himself an image that is not tied to his ethnicity or the history of his fellow Koreans.

In this context, it might be important to note that, even though it deals ostensibly with an inter-ethnic love story, Chōng’s *The Wanderer’s Sky* contains no substantive discussion of the ethnic or racial dimension in the characters’ relationships, as if its story were set in a world where such concerns are non-existent. This feature is consistent with Chōng’s self-presentation as an artist that is able to transcend the accident of his birth, and deal directly with higher existential issues that affect Humanity as a whole.

Considering the literary context of early 1920s Japan, another factor seems important to understand why Chōng would choose this particular mode of self-representation. On the one hand, Chōng’s cosmopolitan Humanism follows in the path of the thought popularized by authors and thinkers of the *Shirakaba* (*White Birch*) group in the 1910s like Mushanokōji Saneatsu (1885-1976) for whom “there were no Japanese: there existed only Humanity (*ningen*), or Mankind (*jinrui*), together with such universals as Love, Art, Nature, Justice, Beauty, and Life.”⁽³⁶⁾ On the other hand, Chōng’s “ascetic humanist idealist” persona seems tailored to follow the path of previous Japanese best-sellers like Ema Shū’s *The Sufferers*,⁽³⁷⁾ Shimada Seijirō’s *The Earth*,⁽³⁸⁾ or Kagawa Toyohiko’s *Across the Death Line*.⁽³⁹⁾ Although they vary in their degree of explicit social criticism and religious content, these three novels share with Chōng’s works a blend of romantic story and general criticism of contemporary civilization, as well as a focus on a self-absorbed male artist hero that fights alone against a materialistic society that does not understand his idealism. By 1923, this mode had coalesced into what literary historian Cécile Sakai has called “Humanistic Realism” (“Jindōshugiteki shinjitsushugi (verisme)”), a combination of artistic, social and religious concerns that was key in the development of literary fiction as a commodity in the modern literary market, and opened up new audiences to make possible the emergence of “popular literature” (*taishū bungaku*) in the contemporary sense.⁽⁴⁰⁾ It is not difficult to see how, in order to project the kind of authorial image to make his work into another best-seller like the titles listed above, Chōng must have wanted to downplay his connection with Korea’s colonial reality, or even his affiliation with a particular ideology, beyond the vague kind of existential Humanism that dominated the era.⁽⁴¹⁾

The discourse of cosmopolitan Humanism thus offered Chōng a third path to claim his authorial persona. It tied

⁽³⁶⁾ Suzuki, Tomi. *Narrating the Self: Fictions of Japanese Modernity*. Stanford University Press, 1996, p.53.

⁽³⁷⁾ *Junansha*. Shinchōsha, 1916.

⁽³⁸⁾ *Chijō*. Shinchōsha, 1919.

⁽³⁹⁾ *Shisen o koete*. Kaizōsha, 1920.

⁽⁴⁰⁾ Sakai, Cécile. *Nihon no taishū bungaku*. (Tr. Asahina Kōji) Heibonsha, 1997, pp.116-118.

him to well-established models for artistic identity through the precedent of the Shirakaba-inspired language of a shared universal Humanity, and it also positioned him and his works within a commercially successful contemporary trend of socially-conscious narratives about idealistic young men fighting the evils of modern civilization. In order to conjure up that image, the language of asceticism and psychological suffering offered him access to established discourses of artistic value, thanks to which he could try and transcend his quality as a Korean colonial subject that was so important for his publisher or his supporting Proletarian critics.

4. Conclusion

As I already mentioned above, Chōng's writings never became the best-sellers he may have hoped them to be and, especially after the Great Kantō Earthquake, he rapidly distanced himself from his erstwhile supporters. He started criticizing pro-independence activists in Korea and the metropolis as the cause of the "misunderstandings" that led to the mistrustful, if not outright oppressive, behavior of the Japanese towards their colonial subjects. Chōng's path towards becoming an imperial propagandist began thus barely a year after he had been praised by proletarian critics as a genuine voice of the Korea people's struggle.

Considering Chōng's many ideological turns, from independence activist to cosmopolitan humanist, to imperial propagandist, and then back to officially registered "cultural personality" in the 1960s by virtue of his political activism in the 1910s, one may be tempted to conclude with little hesitation that Chōng was a survivor ready to change his principles for whatever ideology seemed best to guarantee his relevance in a particular historical conjuncture. There is however the fact that after 1923 he never published any more literary writings. Be it the lack of commercial success, or the shock of seeing first-hand the kind of indiscriminate violence that the racist ideology at the heart of imperialism could unleash on the Korean subjects of the Empire after the Great Kantō Earthquake, there was something that made Chōng abandon completely his cosmopolitan humanist persona and give up on his artistic production. The fact that he never tried to turn his Japanese-language fiction-writing skills into the service of the Empire hints at the fact that there may have been an earnestness to his earlier proclamations of the power of literature, and art in general, to express something higher beyond specific ideological or aesthetic programs. There would have been a path for Chōng to become a "mobilized writer," albeit later in the 1930s, but that is a road he never took.

As researchers like Christina Yi have shown, there always was an unsolvable aporia at the center of the notion of a "Japanese-language literature" produced by Korean imperial subjects. Metropolitan intellectuals could encourage aspiring writers from Korea to use Japanese in their work because "only the literary world (*bundan*) has no national biases or racial discrimination," as prominent critic, author and editor Kikuchi Kan did in his piece "Hopes for Korean Literature" (1924).⁽⁴²⁾ However cases like Chōng Yōn-gyu's show that these utopian proclamations obscured the fact that, for Korean subjects, their path to an authorial persona always ran through their Koreanness as defined by the imperial state, and access to the cosmopolitan persona that Chōng attempted to claim was systematically precluded from them. The contemporary critical discourses around the success of Chang Hyōkchu's "Hell of Hungry Spirits"⁽⁴³⁾ or Kim Saryang's "Into the Light"⁽⁴⁴⁾ could serve as further data points in a direct line together with Chōng's case.⁽⁴⁵⁾

Beyond the ultimately unsolvable question of Chōng's sincerity or phoniness before and after his 1923 ideological about-face, the media discourses around his work and authorial persona, both those promoted by himself and those advanced by publishers and critics, are an interesting example of the array of value models that were available

(41) For a discussion of these works as trend-setting best-selling novels see Koyano Atsushi. *Wasurerareta besutoseraa sakka*. East Press, 2016, pp.85-89. "Shakai hendō to shinsai no naka de: Taishō-ki (2)" Sawamura Shūji. *Besutoseraa zenshi: Kindai-hen*. Chikuma shobō, 2019, pp.183-233.

(42) "Chōsen bungaku no kibō." *Bungei shunjū*, September 1924, 113-114. Quoted in Yi, Christina. *Colonizing Language: Cultural Production and Language Politics in Modern Japan and Korea*. Columbia University Press, 2018, p.27.

(43) "Gakidō." *Kaizō*, April 1932.

(44) "Hikari no naka ni." *Bungei shuto*, October 1939.

(45) See *Colonizing Language*, p.6-8 and 34-35.

in early 1920s Japan to conceptualize why a Korean author writing in Japanese would merit the attention of the public, and a place in the contemporary canon. As a representative of his ethnicity, of his people’s colonial oppression (and solidarity with the efforts of Japan’s proletarian movement), or of his own humanistic anti-materialistic idealism, the many different versions of Chŏng that were created and circulated by/in his contemporary media offer a rich picture of the competing discourses around the value of literature, the voices and experiences that create it, and the limits of who was afforded the right to see and present themselves as artists beyond their ethnicity.