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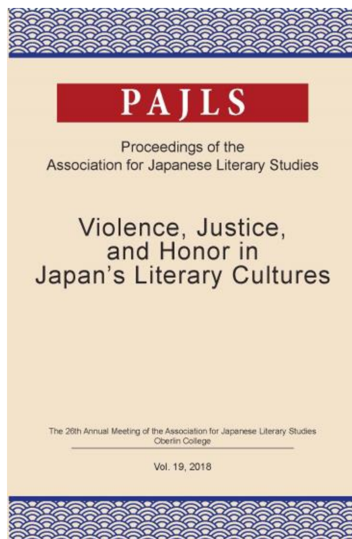
Proceedings of the Association for Japanese Literary Studies 19 (2018): 232–240.



PAJLS 19:
Violence, Justice, and Honor in Japan’s Literary Cultures.
Editor: Ann Sherif
Managing Editor: Matthew Fraleigh

COLONIAL VIOLENCE IN PROLETARIAN LITERATURE: CHANG HYŎK-CHU'S "HELL OF THE STARVING"

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Chang Hyŏk-chu's award-winning story, "Hell of the Starving" (Gakidō, 1932), opens with a bang as dynamite tears apart a mountain as part of a dam-construction project.[2] The "Kaboom!" is not merely an aural assault, but also a threat: shards of newly shorn rock, some "as big as a man might get his arms around," may harm them. It sounds a warning to the workers in the story: those lucky enough to have lunches grab their tins, glossed with the katakana pronunciation of Hangul *papchobaek* in this story published in Japanese, and they scamper up the hill in search of safety (281).[3] The threat of physical harm at the workplace is a leitmotif of proletarian literature including the treacherous conditions aboard Kobayashi Takiji's eponymous crab cannery ship, the absurd-grotesque story of the factory worker who fell in the cement mixer in Hayama Yoshiki's "Letter Found in a Cement Barrel," the women working in the toxic factory producing rubber gas masks in Matsudo Tokiko's story discussed by Norma Field elsewhere in this volume, and the miscarriage-inducing abuse suffered by the protagonist of Nakamoto Takako's story "Red" which ends: "Birthday and burial… a curtain rises, a curtain falls. / A red song has begun—the sun's song. It's red. / It's red… / …red… / …red… / … / …" (33). In "Hell of the Starving," violence threatens to rain down on the men as they work: "shards of stone shot up into the sky like a fountain, scattering themselves as they fell, into the fields and at the river's edge, not far from where the farmers managed to flee" (281).

"Hell of the Starving" dramatizes four kinds of systemic violence. This first is danger inherent in the labor of capitalist production which tolerates, sometimes requires, bodily sacrifices in the building of dams, canals, and bridges; the extraction of industrial metals and fossil fuels; construction of modern cities; and work in toxic factories to produce goods for modern living and military-industrial expansion—most or all of which

[1] https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5433-1679
[2] Chang Hyŏk-chu's name is also read Chan Hyokuchu or Chō Kakuchū in its Japanized version. Chang was living and working in Korea but published this story in a metropolitan Tokyo journal in Japanese. He would later move to Japan, marry a Japanese woman, take her family name, and publish as Noguchi Kakuchū.
[3] All citations of "Hell of the Starving" are from Samuel Perry's translation in *For Dignity, Justice, and Revolution*.

also contribute to environmental degradation and the "slow violence" highlighted by Rob Nixon. Second is workplace violence which is not necessarily inherent in the work itself, but rather wrought or enabled by the demands of capitalist productivity—workplace harassment or bullying by management that might take different forms. Third is violence derived from the logic of imperialist supremacy (aka Social Darwinism, white supremacy, or racism) in which colonized people, or people associated with colonized places now or in the past, may be treated as less than fully human. Finally, poverty itself is a form of classed violence which robs human beings of dignity. Rob Nixon calls out not only the slow violence of environmental degradation but also the special ways that the poor suffer its consequences which is relevant to this panel on proletarian literature as well as the rich papers on the ongoing Fukushima crisis: "By slow violence I mean a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (2). Capitalism not only impoverishes some people while others are enriched, it requires a class of people poor enough to be willing to work in the first three conditions. Being poor enough that one is willing to do dangerous labor while enduring abuse sustained by the logic of productivity and ethnic supremacy makes it impossible to avoid the violence of poverty itself. In the words of the late great Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the "violence of poverty … destroys the souls and bodies of people" (6).

"Hell of the Starving" tells of the violence of poverty with a moving, ethnographically rich story focalized around a famine-struck village in North Gyeongsang (Kyongsang, Gyeongsangbuk) in colonial Korea. "Hell of the Starving" refracts representations of violence differently for men and women, following a masculinist Korean cultural gender code. The men witness and experience harsh consequences—whipping and beating, but also outright killing—for workers' actions perceived as anything from a slowdown to resistance. The women witness and experience violence also, but it occurs in the course of affective labor: a child dies because his good-intentioned mother treated him to whole grain when his starving stomach could not tolerate it; a mother dies falling down a far-away mountain the women climbed to find wild roots to feed their starving families. This essay focuses on the men, primarily because the story works within a masculinist narrative. The violence suffered by women in this story is supplementary; it contributes to the men coming into consciousness to organize and demand fair wages implicitly in order to be better patriarchs.

Twenty-two years into the Japanese colonization of Korea, "Hell of the Starving" debuted in Japanese in a mainstream, highbrow journal, *Kaizō*. It tied for *Kaizō*'s fifth annual prestigious literary award (which had a prize of a whopping 750 yen each); both winners were granted second place. This was in April 1932, the same month that experienced a round of mass arrests that would seriously debilitate the proletarian culture movement which had, until then, managed to grow even amidst fierce government oppression. From nearly 3,500 arrests in 1928, the numbers swelled to nearly 14,000 in 1932 and just over 14,000 in 1933 (Mitchell, 142). The spring 1932 arrests would take in leaders of the movement including Murayama Tomoyoshi, Miyamoto Yuriko, Kubokawa Tsurujirō, and others. Proletarian literature was dangerous—art as a weapon—but according to the prestigious selection committee, it was also prize-worthy.[4]

That this story is set in Korea is highlighted by the character names, explanations of local customs which a metropolitan Japanese-language reader might find unfamiliar, village names, and words like coats, lunch, dam, and itinerant laborer glossed with Korean pronunciation. In addition, the Koreanness is highlighted by the selection committee in a self-congratulating, condescending announcement: "We daresay this is the first Korean writer to launch into our nation's literary *bundan*, and hereafter, the existence of Korean writers will surely be impressed upon the world at large" (Kaizō henshūbu, 274). Other Korean writers such as Kim Yong-je, Han Sik, and Yi Pung-man had previously published in Japan (Perry, 148), but the prize announcement carries an institutional weight. Chang would later repudiate this work, not least because it can be seen to contribute to a narrative of colonial Korea as inhabited by backwards impoverished farmers in need of civilization (Ibid., 147). However, the foregrounded violence effectively deconstructs the civilizing mission of Japan.

Violence at the dam ramps up slowly in this well-constructed story, and some of the violence related to categories two and three (enforced productivity and imperialist supremacy) are rendered not just in the storyline but also orthographically in the *fuseji* (X used to obscure potentially dangerous words or phrases while also suggesting the objectionable). In the first of eight sections of the story, set at the worksite, there are only three words excised by *fuseji*: (1) The director of the project

[4] For more on "Art as a Weapon" in the context of the Japanese proletarian movement, see Field, "Art as a Weapon: Introduction," and Bowen-Struyk and Field, "'Art as a Weapon': Japanese Proletarian Literature on the Centenary of the 1917 Russian Revolution."

is Director XX; (2) Following the description of a whipping: "When the whip uncoiled itself from the man's ashen legs, they XXed bright red" (285); and (3) When the director yells at the foremen to get them to work harder, he says, "No matter if they're XX, they shouldn't be that slow" (286). These Xs purport to obscure the objectionable, but the foremen's whipping is not obscured, just the bright red XX that results. (Easy enough to figure out from context.) And when the director doesn't care if they're XX, the *fuseji* asks readers to imagine the unprintable obscenity of the men's condition which prohibits them from working harder. The foremen are occasionally addressed by Korean names, but the director's name is given in Japanese as *Kantoku* XX (Director XX) —which simultaneously suggests that he is Japanese and that power structures forbid direct mention. These Xs do not merely obscure the objectionable, they also highlight it—and here, the fact that the director is Japanese is highlighted as problematic. True to this foreshadowing, his actions will become increasingly obscene.

In section four, the director's impatience boils over as the project seems to lag behind schedule: "The slow-footed farmers so infuriated the man that a fire seemed to rage inside him. He pressured the foremen but to little effect. Then he replaced two of them. The foremen, for their part, to avoid incurring the director's displeasure, would lash their whips with impunity and hound the men with strained voices" (298). Maedong, for example, pauses to rescue a hibernating frog from the soil and finds himself whipped viciously. When he stands his ground, the foremen beat him unconscious:

> The farmers for their part were dumbstruck and stood there blankly watching this happen. How could anyone not abhor the foremen's violence? After being dragged off in this manner, Maedong was then beaten mercilessly XXX and then XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX.
>
> Their hearts racing, Masan, Hangol, and the others could do nothing but swallow their rage. (300)

The violence incited by the director's lust for increased productivity is carried out by the foremen. Another man, "as wasted away as a tree in winter, was gasping for air as he went about his work" (300). Too weak from hunger to work fast, the man incurs the wrath of the foremen and he has no choice but to accept the beatings or "lose a day's wages" (301). Finally, a foreman, irate that the man no longer responds to the whip, pulls

him down the mountain and beats him further. Somehow still alive, the man gets to his feet and stumbles off "like a ghost drifting away," like the *gakidō*, the eponymous starving ghosts in Buddhist hell paintings (301). As violence escalates, so too do the Xs of excision, making it increasingly difficult at times to tell exactly what is happening, but it is clear that the violence is motivated by the Japanese director's project schedule. Samuel Perry writes:

> The monotonous circulation of the workers—digging, carrying, and dumping dirt—seems almost symbolic for the circulation of capital through their bodies, while their cruel treatment at the hands of the foremen appears to be the direct entry of rationalization and profit calculation in the soul of mankind… As though echoing the story's opening "kaboom," the effects of capital in the Korean countryside have exploded all forms of traditional activity, reorganizing the farmers' labor according to a model of rationality and efficiency. (Perry, 152)

Why are the men so hungry they can't work as fast as the director would like? In fact, the construction of this dam is a purportedly a "relief aid" project to mitigate the suffering caused by a drought in its third year. So many people are suffering that some 700 men showed up to work as day laborers. They were told they would receive one *wŏn* per day, but it turns out they are only paid twenty-five *chŏn*, or a quarter what they were promised. The director calculated correctly that he could pay them less and work them harder (and have them come just every other day):

> If they had actually put each of the farmers to work at one *wŏn* per day as the county magistrate had originally proposed, the director's profit margin would have dropped considerably, so the decision was made to lower the daily wage to a quarter of a *wŏn* and to have each farmer work not every day, but every other. It was thought that the farmers would come flocking in like crows even if offered a paltry twenty *chŏn* per day. And a mere glance at how diligently the farmers now worked under the direction of the foremen—without grumbling a single word of complaint—might lead anyone to a similar conclusion. (284)

This "relief" project does not trickle down to the starving. Insufficient to pay for the food they burn in such demanding labor, the men do in fact complain to each other that the wages are not worth it. The repetition of

this project as "relief" project in the context of extreme mistreatment and underpayment for labor reveals the hypocrisy of so-called aid. And the logic of compulsory productivity of capitalism ensures that the starving men will in turn be blamed for their own misery.

So why do they come back? Masan returns from work late at night after walking the long walk home across multiple mountain passes, determined to refuse exploitation. But then he sees the sweet sleeping face of his wife and remembers with affection her youth and vitality when they courted a mere seven years earlier: "The past seven years of hardship, however, and the famine caused by three years of drought had left her as withered and discolored as the grass in winter. Right there in the darkness, as he traced her faint outline, he was reminded of the pretty girl that Kamnyŏn had once been" (289). He recalls a time when he visited her father's house on an errand and spied her inside winding cotton on a spinning wheel and singing a folk song about love with the other girls working with her: he saw her "with cheeks as pink as peaches, more beautiful that he could bear" (290).

Masan and the other men, including those who are no more than hungry ghosts shuffling along, will return to the worksite and allow themselves to be exploited because poverty has robbed them of any other means of living: "Today Masan had found the unjust conduct of the foremen so repellent that he'd decided never to go back to work again, but now as he looked down at his wife, and over at his sleeping children—with bellies protruding like bullfrogs—he knew he simply had to go on working, even if only for that twenty-five *chŏn* per day" (290). This is how the violence of poverty enables the first three kinds of violence of capitalism.

In the third section of the story, the women hear that grain will be distributed as further "relief aid" at the township office and hundreds of starving women showed up. The 500 women gathered hoping for grain evince the inhumane living conditions:

> One might have counted five hundred people there, but what was most horrific was found not in their numbers, but in their complexions. The yellow ones, still swollen with fluid, had not yet reached the worst stage of starvation. Those with faces speckled black or dark red were actually starving—not quite dead, but just barely hanging on. Only a very few of them were yellow, and most had sores covering their bodies like lepers. The children, too, were the same shades as their mothers, but something sweet and childlike still lingered in their faces, and oddly for that very

> reason they seemed far more pitiful. (292)

Since the available grain was insufficient to feed them all, it was decided that only those women who did not have men working at the dam project could collect it: "The dam construction project was a form of drought relief itself, just as was this millet distribution, and it would not have been fair to offer some people double benefits—such was the justification" (294). Samuel Perry writes: "The irony of 'relief aid' offered by a colonial government that has systematically helped to impoverish the colony's majority population of agricultural workers rings as clear as a bell in the distancing formality and third-person address of Chang's narrator" (151).

The violence of poverty is the result of a system that alienates men and women from the fruits of their labors:

> The very farmers who harvested all the rice were scarcely able to eat a single grain themselves. In order to pay for their agricultural expenses and XX, they needed to sell what remained of their rice crop—amounting to less than a third—after delivering the land rent. Then they would buy Manchurian millet and thin it out with onions and sorghum as their staple diet. But when the drought hit, they had to resort to eating wild grass roots just as the cattle did. (292–93)

"Allowing" peasants to work for the opportunity to earn wages to alleviate drought—a drought experienced by all, not just strong men—illustrates the ideology of capitalism, alienating those with nothing but their labor to sell from the products of their labor. Karl Marx writes:

> First, the fact that labor is external to the worker, i.e., it does not belong to his intrinsic nature; that in his work, therefore, he does not affirm himself but denies himself, does not feel content but unhappy, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind... External labor, labor in which man alienates himself, is a labor of self-sacrifice, of mortification. (XXIII)

This logic of "relief aid" qua capitalism is observable across different cultures although it is crafty in its ability to adapt to specific cultures.

In this proletarian story, the accumulation of tragedy might not have tipped the scale, but the men learn that Director XX is pocketing the difference between what they were promised and what they have received,

and they organize and demand more humane work conditions. Masan announces: "Here we are, slaving away day after day with the foremen XXXXXX. Well, I've been thinking about just who really benefits from all this. And there's no way in hell that any of us are going to make a penny in profit once this dam is completed" (317–318). Yun, a young man from a neighboring village who was injured on the job, leads them to draw up demands: (1) Triple wages (2) Work hours from 8–5 and (3) No more XXing. The director, caught off guard, verbally accepts the demands, but the next day Yun is taken away and XXed "for the time being." The story ends with the men storming the tavern used as headquarters, grabbing the director and marching him through the mountains, presumably to release Yun.

Whether they achieve their goal of releasing Yun, whether they get their reasonable demands—is left unfinished, leaving the reader to imagine the ending. Even this potentially optimistic ending, we might note however, will not alleviate the suffering of many or even most of the villagers, most especially the elderly, widows, children, and the infirm. This representation of Korean peasants may have participated in a stereotype of colonial Koreans as impoverished and uncivilized. But as seen in this story, being robbed of the fruits of one's labor, alienated from them, dispirited and broken is the invisible-but-observable violence of capitalism, a violence that links colonial Koreans and Japanese peasants—the dirty little secret exposed by proletarian literature.

The lives of the poor have registered in elite literary forms as obscene and fraught with violence, but the proletarian arts movement of the "red decade" (1925–1935) sought to make visible the systemic class violence which created the grotesquerie of poverty. (What's obscene? The poor or the system that creates and/or perpetuates poverty?) Proletarian writers endeavored to show how certain kinds of violence experienced as deeply personal such as sexual harassment, elitism in education, and hunger were not only the result of class exploitation, but also functioned to sustain, indeed justify, that exploitation.

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