



East Asian History

NUMBER 39 · DECEMBER 2014

www.eastasianhistory.org

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Print PDFs based on an original design by Maureen MacKenzie-Taylor
- This is the thirty-ninth issue of *East Asian History*, the second published in electronic form, December 2014. It continues the series previously entitled *Papers on Far Eastern History*.
- Contributions to <http://www.eastasianhistory.org/contribute>
Back issues <http://www.eastasianhistory.org/archive>
- To cite this journal, use page numbers from PDF versions
- ISSN (electronic) 1839-9010
- Copyright notice Copyright for the intellectual content of each paper is retained by its author.
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- Contact eastasianhistory@anu.edu.au
- Banner calligraphy Huai Su 懷素 (737–799), Tang calligrapher and Buddhist monk

Published jointly by
The Australian National University and Leiden University



Australian
National
University



Universiteit Leiden

THE DEVELOPMENT OF MASS INTELLECTUALITY: READING CIRCLES AND SOCIALIST CULTURE IN 1920S KOREA

 Jung-Hwan Cheon
Translated by Bora Chung and Sunyoung Park

Translators' Note

This essay is a follow-up study to the author's best-known work, *Kūndae ūi ch'aek ikki* 근대의 책읽기 (Seoul: P'urūn yōksa, 2003), a groundbreaking study of colonial Korean readership. With its focus on the 1920s reading circle movement and the role of socialist culture within it, the essay makes a crucial contribution to current debates over a range of key issues such as colonial modernity, imperial cultural hegemony and colonial popular subjectivity, the intertwined development of literature and other modern media, and the historical impact of socialism on the formation of modern culture. The essay is reproduced here in its updated version. It was originally published in Korean as '1920-nyōndae toksōhoe wa "sahoejuūi munhwa": sahoejuūi wa kūndaejōk taejung chisōng ūi hyōngsōng (2)' 1920년대 독서회와 '사회주의 문화': 사회주의와 근대적 대중 지성의 형성 (2) in *Taedong munhwa yōn'gu* 대동문화연구 64 (2008): 41-70. The concept of 'mass intellectuality' was introduced by Paolo Virno to refer to the subjective component of Marx's 'general intellect', or, in simpler terms, common public knowledge. According to Virno, mass intellectuality refers to 'the repository of the indivisible knowledge of living subjects and their linguistic cooperation'. See Virno, 'Notes on the "General Intellect"', trans. Cesare Casarino, in eds Makdisi et al., *Marxism Beyond Marxism* (New York: Routledge, 1996), pp.265-72 (from p.270). 'Mass intellectuality' or 'mass intellect' in this essay is a translation of the author's term *taejung chisōng* in Korean and refers to the collective intelligence of the masses. See Jung-hwan Cheon 천정환, *Taejung chisōng ūi sidae* 대중지성의 시대 (Seoul: P'urūn yōksa, 2008).

- 1 For relevant recent studies, see Cho Chôngbong 조정봉, 'Ilcheha yahak ūi kyoyukchök silch'ôn' 일제하 야학의 교육적 실천 (PhD diss., Kyöngbuk University, 2001); Cho Ŭnsuk 조은숙, 'Singminji sigi tonghwahoe yôn'gu' 식민지시기 '동화회 (童話會)' 연구, *Minjok munhwa* 민족문화 46 (December 2006): 225-65; Kwön Yongsön 권용선, '1910-nyöndaë "kündaëjök külsügi" ūi hyöngsöng kwajöng yôn'gu' 1910년대 근대적 글쓰기의 형성과정 연구 (PhD diss., Inha University, 2004); Sin Jiyöng 신지영, 'Han'guk kündaë ūi yönsöl·chwad-amhoe yôn'gu: sinchejök tamnon konggan ūi hyöngsöng kwa pyönhwa' 한국 근대의 연설·좌담회 연구: 신체적 담론 공간의 형성과 변화 (PhD diss., Yonsei University, 2010); Yi Hwajin 이화진, 'Sori ūi pokche wa kuyön konggan ūi chaep'yönsöng' 소리의 복제와 구연공간의 재편성 *Hyöndaë munhak ūi yôn'gu* 현대문학의 연구 25 (2005): 165-97; Yu Sönyöng 유선영, 'Kükchang kugyöng kwa hwaltong sajin pogi: ch'unggyök ūi küdnaë kürigo chülköum ūi hunyuk' 극장구경과 활동사진 보기: 충격의 근대 그리고 즐거움의 훈육, *Yöksa pip'yöng* 역사비평 (Fall 2003): 7-62 and 'Hwangsae singminji ūi söyang yöngghwa kwallam kwa sobi silch'ôn 1934-1942: cheguk e taehan 'munhwajök puin' ūi silch'önsöng kwa chöngsangghwa kwajöng' 황색 식민지의 서양영화 관람과 소비실천, 1934-1942 제국에 대한 '문화적 부인'의 실천성과 정상화 과정, *Öllon kwa sahoe* 언론과사회 13.2 (May 2005): 362-76.
- 2 By 'socialist culture', I am not referring to any existing cultural convention. Rather, I am using it as a synonym for 'cultural socialism', that is, the actual cultural impact of a socialist movement. See Geoff Eley's use of the term 'cultural socialism' in *The LEFT 1848-2000: Miwan ūi kihoe, yuröp chwap'a ūi yöksa* The LEFT 1848-2000: 미완의 기획, 유럽 좌파의 역사, trans. Yu Kangün 유강은 (Seoul: Ppuri wa ip'ari, 2008). Raymond Williams's *The Long Revolution* has been translated into Korean under the title of *Kinagin hyöngmyöng* 기나긴 혁명, trans. Söng Ŭnae 성은애 (Seoul: Munhak tongnae, 2007).
- 3 See Alain Badiou's *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, which was translated under the title of *Yullihak* 윤리학, trans. Yi Chongyöng 이종영 (Seoul: Tongmunsönn, 2001).
- 4 For a discussion of the 'immorality' of the modern socialist movement, see Yi Chin'gyöng 이진경, 'Chöktae ūi chöngch'ihak, ujöng ūi chöngch'ihak' 적대의 정치학, 우정의 정치학, in *Ko Pyöngkwön* 고병권 et al., *K'omyunjuüi sönnön* 코뮌주의 선언 (Seoul: Kyoyangin, 2008).

On the Modus Vivendi of 'Socialist Culture'

At its core, this study concerns the creation of a new network of intellectual human relationships and their cultural-historical consequences, which transformed the culture and the epistemological mode of knowledge in early modern Korea. We have heard about the late-1890s anti-imperialist and pro-reformist movement of the People's Assembly (*Manmin kongdonghoe* 만민공동회); the village councils (*chipkangso* 집강소) in the Eastern Learning (*tonghak* 동학) peasant movement; the schools, churches, and marketplaces in the March First movement, the popular nationwide anti-imperialist uprisings of 1919; and other numerous, more ordinary mass gatherings in places such as public lecture halls, night schools, reading circles, movie houses, amateur theatres, and children's story clubs. However, not enough research has been done on the great transformations that actually occurred in these places.¹ Here, language and knowledge were shared and recreated, resulting in the emergence and reformation of modern men and women. In these places, the instruments of knowledge, such as printed texts, were most probably shared by the masses, and it turned them into the agents of knowledge.

The spread of socialism and 'socialist culture', which is conceived here in the broadest possible sense, served as a catalyst in 1920s Korea for an epochal cultural transformation, 'the long revolution' in Raymond Williams's words.² One important attribute of socialist culture is its culture of networking, the group mentality that is its inherent trait. A socialist culture is always 'culture as a movement'. To put it differently, socialist culture is not an ordinary form of culture that takes shape during the course of human interactions with tradition and nature. It is also different from the civilisation that the 'human animal' in Alain Badiou's term, has achieved by developing a social distribution system of desires.³ Rather, socialist culture is a cultural 'project' that aims to reform or liberate individual and collective human desires. (For this reason, the socialist culture/ethics has an ambivalence: it may be the most true to universal human nature but may also be the most immoral and unethical in a given society.)⁴ Socialism has always taken shape, either in the dying order of an ancient regime or in the emergent order of developing capitalism, as a self-conscious project of overcoming and sublation, of fundamental destruction and construction. This is the basic principle of socialist politics and economics, as well as of socialist culture, which is nothing but a 'cultural revolution'.

As a self-conscious revolutionary doctrine, socialism not only is a politico-economic theory but also exists in the form of individual ethical values and emotional urges. In the process of participating in a socialist movement, individuals are expected to undergo a transformation into new intellectual and moral beings. One is interpellated into becoming a revolutionary subject toward both oneself and others. A socialist is therefore likely to face endless inner conflicts and moral crises in his everyday life, especially in issues of the 'personal' sphere, such as family, love, and marriage. Such demands make mass enlightenment and an individual's ideological education the most important aspects of the movement itself. ('Propagandise and organise!') Consequently, socialism is inherently associated with the organisation of various interpersonal networks and their rigorous intellectual activities. Revolution is not only a moral confrontation but also an intellectual struggle against the enemy, and here the enemy may include oneself.

Yet these are merely the theoretical principles of socialist culture. Admittedly, no ideal state of socialist culture exists, and we cannot find it as a concrete autonomous historical entity for the following reasons. First and foremost, socialist culture is subjected to the influence of the hegemonic culture, as well as interior and exterior political dynamics. Also, established cultural forms and traditions continue to exercise powerful influences, even in cases when they are no longer dominant. In fact, in practice, socialist culture can exist only in conflict with these forces and is thus in an ever-evolving process of transformation. Accordingly, we can grasp socialist culture only in its entangled, complex, and unstable form within a specific historical context.

In 1920s Korea, socialism exerted a tangible transformative impact on the still-incipient modern culture. Contrary to popular perception, socialist culture can exist — and has long existed — not only in a postrevolutionary society but also in a society that is still largely feudalistic or in the early stages of capitalism. First, we find it in a socialist's ideology and ways of thinking, in his attitude toward everyday life, including its personal dimensions, and even in his physicality. Second, it appears in the socialist cultural movement proper, that is, as a tendency in literature and artistic works produced by the intelligentsia. Finally, it is also expressed in the cultural policies of socialist (avant-garde/mass) parties, the labour union movement and its culture, and certain relevant forms of mass culture. 'Socialist culture', that is, the ideological impact of socialism on actual cultural practices, encompasses the intellectual and behavioural modes of socialist activists, a concrete cultural reality expressed by labour unions and other proletarian organisations, and the cultural ideals of socialism and their propagation.

Since the March First movement in 1919, the socialist movement arose in Korea as a novel and popular force. An important component of 1920s culture, it provided new momentum for modernisation. The then emerging popular culture and the existing traditional and folk culture also changed and reorganised themselves in the course of interacting with the socialist movement. As mentioned earlier, a socialist movement must have a vision of conscious cultural transformation. If one may define 'culture' as a matrix of hegemonic values, attitudes, beliefs, orientations, and mentalities in a given society, socialism without a vision and with no practice of cultural innovation may easily relapse into feudalism or capitalism. For this reason, the 'postrevolutionary' communist state and political parties try to prevent capitalistic enterprises from arising by forcefully putting cultural revolution projects into practice.⁵

So, then, how did the 1920s Korean socialist movement envision its revolutionary mission? And under what specific conditions did it develop its strategies? As is well known, it was the right-wing, moderate nationalists who first paid attention to the importance of culture and promoted a nationalist cultural reform movement. Their cultural nationalist movement was, however, regarded by their socialist contemporaries as an escapist project, an indirect expression of reactionary conservative reformism, that sought to avoid the actual material struggle for national liberation. Socialists debated the question of how to react to the cultural nationalist movement, as they tried to decide the policy lines of the early communist movement.⁶ Yet this does not necessarily imply that socialists themselves had no interest in cultural revolution as a method of social reform. To the contrary, from the very beginning, they were mindful of the need to reconstruct mass culture.⁷

5 Illustrative are China's path from the New Democratic Revolution to the Cultural Revolution, North Korea's *Juche* Revolution, and also the efforts of the Soviet Union and other 'actually existing' socialist states.

6 For instance, Chang Tōksu 장덕수 (1894–1947), a leading member of the Korean Socialist Party in Shanghai, argued that socialists should launch a cultural enlightenment movement in order to cultivate the critical agency of the masses for their long-term goal of inspiring a communist revolution in Korea. By contrast, Kim Saguk 김사국 (1892–1926), a Japan-educated socialist leader, downplayed the necessity of a cultural movement, arguing instead that socialists should instead focus on political struggles to liberate Korea and foster a revolution there. See Im Kyōngsōk 임경석, *Han'guk sahojuūi ūi kiwōn* 한국 사회주의의 기원 (Seoul: Yōksa pipy'ōng, 2004), pp.559–60.

7 For instance, the journal *Sin saenghwal* 신생활, which was launched with the goal of 'creating a people's culture and encouraging liberal ideas', promoted the socialist construction of a new culture that would counter the 'old' culture of the bourgeoisie through articles such as Kim Myōngsik's 김명식 'Kumunhwa wa sinmunhwa' 舊文化와 新文化 *Sin saenghwal*, March 1922: 2–6 and Chōng Paek's 정 백 'Nonong Nosoā ūi munhwa sisōl' 勞農露西亞의 文化施設, *Sin saenghwal*, May 1922, p.18.

8 'The Korean Communist Manifesto', published in *Pulkot 불꽃*, 1926, includes the following passage: 'Defy any limit to one's conscience, freedom of speech, the press, assembly, association, and a strike/ Abolish the clan system and give absolute equal rights to everyone/ Emancipate women from all binds/ Make Korean the official language in all public offices and organisations/ guarantee the freedom of schooling and implement free compulsory secular and vocational education for boys and girls up to the age of sixteen/ Provide food, clothes, and stationery supplies to disadvantaged children of school age.' Quoted in Pak Ch'ansŭng 박찬승, *Han'guk kŭnhyŏndaesa rŭl illŭnda 한국 근현대사를 읽는다* (Seoul: Kyŏngin munhwa, 2010), pp.248–49.

9 The multiple layers of socialist culture can be observed in the tables on the next page. Tables 1 and 2 show the level of education and the vocations of people who were arrested in Korean Communist Party (KCP) incidents of 1925 and 1930. Table 1 is based on two relevant tables in Chŏn Sangsuk 전상숙, *Ilche sigi sahojuui chisigin yŏn'gu 일제 시기 사회주의 지식인 연구* (Seoul: Chisik sanŏpsa, 2004), pp.92 and 200; and the sources for Table 2 are in *ibid.*, pp.96 and 204.

10 See Maeda Ai 前田愛, *Kindai dokusha no seiritsu 近代読者の成立* (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 2001), pp.162–205 and Jung-Hwan Cheon, *Kŭndae ūi ch'aek ikki* (Seoul: P'urŭn yŏksa, 2003), pp.108–33.

11 Reading circles have been an important subject in studies of the history of national independence movements, but little has been written on the layered composition of reading circles or their significance in the modern cultural history of Korea. The following studies have examined the relationship between reading circles and student movements in Kwangju and Wŏnsan: Yi Sangsŏp 이상섭, '1930-nyŏndae hangil haksaeŅg undong e taehan ilgoch'al—toksŏhoe undong ūl chungsim ūro' 1930 년대 항일 학생운동에 대한 일고찰—독서회 운동을 중심으로 (Masters thesis, Tongguk University, 1993); and Kim Sŏngmin 김성민, 'Kwangju haksaeŅg undong yŏn'gu' 광주학생운동 연구 (PhD diss., Kungmin University, 2007).

12 For the new cultural trends of the eighteenth century and the period's intellectual movements, see Kang Myŏnggwan 강명관, *Ch'aek pŏlledŭl Chosŏn ūl mandŭlta 책벌레들 조선을 만든다* (Seoul: P'urŭn yboksas, 2007). For reformist intellectuals' organisation of reading circles at the turn of the century, see Yŏ Kyuhyŏng 여규형, 'Sŏ i' 序二, *Tae-dong hakhoe wŏlbo* 대동학회 월보1 (Feb. 1908): 1–2.

The presence of the Korea Artista Proleta Federatio (1925–1935) — a major Marxist cultural organisation — as well as the educational and social platform of the Korean Communist Party, is proof of such awareness.⁸

This study aims to examine the variety and complexity of the social classes and strata that formed the period's socialist culture. Given contemporary social conditions, one may assume that socialist culture existed in the following (dis)continuous layers:

1. urban working-class culture
2. a new peasant culture that competed with the traditional one
3. the socialist culture of students and young urban residents with secondary or higher-level education
4. the high elite culture of university-educated intellectuals.

The main factors that divide these categories of people are their level of contact with cultural modernity, their experience of official education and print culture, and their class status. These factors roughly overlapped with various subjects' cultural dispositions, corresponding with the period's topography of uneven, non-simultaneous cultural developments. These categories constituted multiple layers of socialist culture that produced socialism as a mass movement in colonial Korea.⁹

In pursuing the objective above, this study focuses on reading circles of the 1920s as specific historical groups that can reveal the *modus vivendi* of socialist culture. Reading in reading circles was a communal activity by nature, a kind of 'ideological reading-together'.¹⁰ In other words, the reason for the communal act of reading was to organise and struggle and to overcome the cultural differences among the members. As a way to explore modern print culture, reading circles were the most powerful network to propagate knowledge, and they were places of mass enlightenment. The long activist decade of the 1920s witnessed the so-called reading circle phenomenon, or the proliferation of an exploding number of reading circles, and these circles became one of the main features of the period's culture. Reading circles can be regarded as a fitting outcome of building a socialist culture, especially when one considers the historical conditions of 1920s Korea.

The question of why reading circles were formed relates to a cluster of other issues that existed at the time. The following were particularly relevant: the expansion of new modern networks of human interaction and the spread of knowledge, the formation of a modern mass intellect and the mass experience of cultural modernity, the division of cultural subjects and their non-simultaneous experiences of modernity, and the intersections between socialist culture and print media. These four factors coincided in 1920s Korea to occasion the unprecedented growth of reading circles as a far-flung and decentralised intellectual network for the masses.¹¹

The Sociocultural Context of the 'Reading Circle Phenomenon'

Reading Circles: The Course of Development

We can find a form of communal reading in the practice of reading by turns among eighteenth-century Practical Learning (*Sirhak* 실학) scholars, and reading circles were also apparently popular in the academic meetings of intellectuals at the turn of the century.¹² Their gatherings and the practice of communal reading were closely tied to shifting intellectual trends of the times. The urge

Table 1: Education Levels of Suspects in KCP Incidents

Education Level of Arrestees	1925	1930
No schooling	3	
Traditional Chinese literary education	11	4
Elementary school dropouts	57	7
Elementary school graduates	25	33
Junior high and high school dropouts		50
Junior high and high school graduates	34	35
Vocational school and college graduates	27	33
Overseas education	82	106
Unknown	286	449
Total	525	695

Table 2: Vocations of Suspects in KCP Incidents

Vocation of Arrestees	1925	1930
Factory worker	26	37
Agricultural worker	63	91
Fisherman	3	
Day labourer		71
Journalist	120	43
Typesetter	9	23
Book salesman		4
Delivery man	1	5
Student	23	90
Teacher	13	30
Self-employed/merchant	24	20
Barber	5	
Office worker	6	6
Other	19	25
Unemployed	86	179
Unknown	127	61
Total	525	695

to acquire new and innovative forms of knowledge expressed itself in the form of collective reading. Thus, the act of ‘reading together’ was deeply related to the formation of a new culture. The solidarity of knowledge served as a force to open up a new era.

We may roughly summarise the history of colonial Korean reading circles as follows. From the early to the mid-1920s, numerous reading circles were formed all over the Korean peninsula. These circles were widespread and sprung up among many groups of people, ranging from Korean ethnic communities in Jiandao 間島 (Gando 간도) in eastern Manchuria to the inhabitants of Cheju island in the far south. Youth groups, children’s clubs, local organisations, labour unions, and peasants’ unions led the formation of such circles. Middle schools and high schools were also major venues for reading groups, as well as women’s organisations and religious (mainly Christian) organisations, and many other groups from various social classes and strata.¹³ With the mass propagation of socialist ideology, some of the reading circles came to assume an ideological character. Around 1924, newspapers began to mention reading circles in the context of ‘ideologically dangerous’ political events. After that date, articles related to reading circles appeared in newspapers almost every day. The anti-imperialist uprisings of 10 June 1926, confirmed that students’ reading circles often doubled as resistance organisations.¹⁴ Around this time, the general public began to regard reading circles themselves as dangerous. Reading circles continued to be prominent in the media through the 1929 Kwangju Students’ movement (*Kwangju haksang undong* 광주학생운동) into the 1930s, reaching their peak in 1931–33. From 1937 on, following the outbreak of the second Sino-Japanese War, newspaper articles about reading circles suddenly began to disappear, but reading circles themselves did not; they simply went underground.

The emergence of reading circles coincided with the establishment of communal spaces that were symbolic of modernity. As the public education system expanded and new institutional buildings, such as schools, churches, and youth clubs appeared, reading circles also began to proliferate. In other words, their emergence was preceded by the creation of relatively secure communal spaces where members with a similar intellectual capacity could routinely associate within an egalitarian framework of social relations. Only under these material conditions could reading circles undergo such explosive growth.

13 See, for instance, ‘Chǒnbuk Kimje sonyǒn toksǒhoe ch’angnip’ 전북 金堤 소년독서회 창립, *Tonga ilbo* 동아일보, 13 October 1927; ‘Kyǒngnam Kimhaegun Chinyǒng sonyǒnhoe, cha’ngnip taehoe kaech’oe hago munmaeng t’oech’i toksǒhoe’ 경남 金海郡 進永소년회, 창립대회 개최하고 문맹퇴치 독서회, *Tonga ilbo*, 24 April 1928; ‘Wisan toksǒgye ūi hososik, Wisan ch’ǒngnyǒnhoe wa sagye tongjija ro chojiktōen Wisan toksǒhoe ka kǒwǒl p’aril palhoe’ 蔚山讀書界의 好消息. 蔚山青年會와 斯界同志者로 조직된 蔚山讀書會가 去月八日發會, *Chosǒn ilbo* 조선일보, 2 October 1923; ‘Kanto toksǒhoe imsi ch’onghoe: chungyo sahang kyǒrūi’ 간도독서회 임시총회. 중요 사항 결의, *Chosǒn ilbo*, 31 July 1926; and Yi Chongch’ŏl 이종철, ‘Ilche sidae Kangnǔng chibang hangil undong yǒn’gu’ 日帝時代 江陵地方 抗日運動 研究, *Yǒngdong munhwa* 嶺東文化, Vol.5 (1994): 131–57.

14 Students in the Pukchǒng Agricultural School obtained permission from the authorities to organise a reading circle with the declared purpose of helping their school studies. The reading circle was formed through a general election of its members, yet later the group turned radical and came to be known as one of the ‘red’ reading circles that led the 1929 student movement. See ‘Pukch’ǒng nongyosaeng sibilmyǒng kongp’an chosǒn xx ūi p’iryō rŭl nyǒksǒl’ 北靑農校生 十一名

公判 조선○○의 필요를 력설, *Tonga ilbo*, 20 November 1929. Contemporary readers would have easily recognised the erased two-syllable words as ‘liberation’ (*chayu* 자유) or ‘independence’ (*haebang* 해방).

15 See Jung-Hwan Cheon, *Künddae üi ch'aek ikki*, pp.108–45.

16 See So Raesöp 소래섭, ‘Paek Sök si e nat'anan ümsik üi üimi yön'gu’ 백석 시에 나타난 음식의 의미 연구 (PhD diss., Seoul National University, 2008); Im T'aehun 임태훈, ‘Söri üi modönit'i wa ümgyöng üi palgyön’ ‘소리’의 모더니티와 ‘音景’의 발견 in *Proceedings of the 6th Kubo Conference* 제 6회 구보학회 자료집 (Seoul: Sungg-yunkwan University, 2008).

17 To cite the relevant passage in full, ‘If literature consists of poetry, prose, novels and more, speech can be classified into lectures, debates, addresses, and so on. The best among them would be public lectures, which are most effective in moving a large number of audience members within a short time by affectively stimulating their intellect to improve their judgment on right and wrong and also on the meritorious and the defective. Therefore, we should congratulate ourselves on having the opportunity to attend public lectures by renowned members of the elite several times a month. Yet those who live some distance away from Seoul are not able to benefit from such occasions, and even those who live in the city sometimes cannot attend a lecture, although they want to, due to the size limits of a lecture hall or a scheduling conflict. Like our readers, we also regret this problem.’ See ‘Kangyön wöltan,’ *Kaeböök*, November 1921: 57–67.

In addition, the popularisation of reading circles happened concurrently with the expansion of literacy, which was the most important instrument of modern knowledge. In the 1920s, for the first time in Korean history, the question of general literacy for the entire population was seriously considered, and an effort to improve the literacy rate was launched in all social classes and levels. With these facts in mind, one may further discuss the socio-cultural context of the ‘reading circle phenomenon’ from two particularly important angles: the development of media technology and the expansion of colonial education.

Reading Circles and Media Fusion

In the 1920s, modern print culture was spreading fast in Korea, substantially contributing to the expansion of ‘visual’ modernity in a broad sense.¹⁵ In addition to vision, the early modern period between the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century saw the comprehensive development of all senses — aural, olfactory, and haptic.¹⁶ Such a development of sensibilities was enabled by the rapid advancement of media technology and resulted in the appearance of a new physicality and the reorganisation of people’s desires.

As is well known, the 1920s were an era of public lectures and debates, following the first wave of these in the 1890s–1900s. The new era was born with the popularisation of modern intellectual ideas through the general expansion of print culture. This second wave of public lectures and debates was not a simple remnant of traditional oral culture, but rather was a restructuring of it. The expansion of print culture and the transformation of aural culture brought about new and different forms of media fusion and the multisensory consumption of words by the masses, who not only read but also listened to them. Such multimedia propagation took place, for example, in many different forms of oral narration, including children’s storytelling clubs. With the gramophone, the radio, and the cinema, too, much of the audience was generated by such cross-media interaction. It was quite common for the print media to publish transcripts of popular lectures and speeches, which were the representative forms of contemporary aural culture.

Multimedia propagation was not simply a way of compensating for low rates of literacy. Here, not only the objective material situation but also subjective desire and will mattered. We need to take into consideration the passion for enlightenment, the spreading consciousness of belonging to a political community, and the urge for action. When the demand for political communication reached an explosive level, society utilised all of its available media technologies and channels of broadcasting completely. Historically, revolution and war tended to spur on the rapid development of communication and media technology. Such dynamism was present in the cultural explosion of the 1920s.

Illustrating the situation was an editor’s comment in the ‘Monthly Lecture’ (*Kangyön wöltan* 講演月旦) section of *Kaeböök* 開闢.¹⁷ Arguably the most influential magazine in Korea at the time, it created this section to publish transcripts of famous lectures of the month, as well as commentaries on them. In reflecting on the editorial intent, an anonymous writer noted the significance of lecture meetings, as well as their spatial and temporal limitations. Lecture meetings offered, he reflected, an opportunity to engage in communal thinking and experience the actual practice of abstract ideology

in a way that was impossible through reading or writing. However, lectures had their own limits: not only were lecture halls often too small, but the non-repeatable nature of lectures also lessened their impact. Immortalising the spoken words in print, he proposed, would help overcome the spatial and temporal limitations of sound and would convey the lectures beyond the walls of lecture halls, as well as across regional borders.

Accordingly, reading circles, which were a novel and major part of modern print culture, were also sites for the cross-media propagation of knowledge. In the circles, members often read the texts in advance, alone, in places where others were excluded; during these moments of silent personal reading, the individual reader's interpretive freedom was fully in effect. At the same time, the members of reading circles took part in communal reading, which included listening to and interacting with others. Thus, reading circles did not allow unlimited individual interpretation of the texts. Rather, the interpretation could be affected by the relationship between the leader/host and the reading circle members, and also by accessibility to the text, because members often shared a single copy. They would circulate the communal copy in advance or even just read it aloud together. Therefore, reading circles contributed in several ways to the spread of print culture.

In early 1920s Korea, people tended to regard lectures, discussions, speeches, and reading circles as one package. For example, many youth organisations, which sprouted up in every region, commonly declared that their goals were to read newspapers and magazines for intellectual training and to establish lecture meetings, discussion forums, and night schools. These goals were not unique to voluntary local youth organisations. Reformist culturists and even bureaucratic Japanese agents also mentioned the same objectives in their guidelines for intervention into youth organisations.¹⁸ In September 1925, the *Samga* Youth Group (*Samga ch'ōngnyōnhoe* 三嘉 청년회) in South Kyōngsang province planned a parade and demonstration in celebration of International Youth Day. When stopped by the Japanese police, they held an indoor reading event instead.¹⁹ This might not be readily understandable from today's perspective, but it showed that a 'reading event' could generally double as a public discussion meeting as well.

Reading Circles and 1920s Colonial Education

Public education is the best mechanism to promote the expansion of print culture. Modern nation-states have achieved this objective on a mass scale through compulsory education. From this point of view, Japanese imperialism was the single most important force that shaped the general public's level of knowledge in early modern Korea and the development of its public and private educational institutions. The colonial government, however, also derailed and suppressed Korean efforts to expand modern education and to develop the collective intelligence of the masses.

First, the colonial government restricted the distribution of knowledge by enforcing the Private School Law (*Sarip hakkyoryōng* 사립학교령) (1911), thus denying the Korean masses' voluntary enthusiasm for education. This legislation forced the closure of many existing schools run by Western missionaries and patriotic Korean intellectuals. The law obliged Koreans to resort to other means to pursue their education by reappropriating traditional village schools (*sōdang* 서당) and, more importantly, by creating alternative means of education such as night schools, reading circles, lecture/

18 In their guiding principles for youth organisations in South Chōlla province, the local authorities aimed to lead existing youth groups in a 'sound' direction, as well as to establish new 'sound' youth groups under their direct control. More specific goals included to 'organise night schools, workshops, lectures, research groups, investigative committees, and briefing sessions in order to reinforce the members' learning capacity and also to instill in them practical knowledge / grow a communal forest and purchase silk worms from common savings in order to encourage a sense of community among villagers and inculcate a desirable national character in them / and organise reading circles, a lending library, and the subscription of newspapers and magazines in order to improve the public desire for knowledge and to cultivate reading habits.' See 'Ch'ōngnyōnhoe chido pangch'im' 青年會指導方針, quoted in Pak Ch'ansūng 박찬승, *Han'guk kūndae ch'ōngch'i sasangsa yōn'gu* 한국 근대 정치 사상사 연구 (Seoul: Yōksa pip'yōngsa, 1992), p.241.

19 'Kukche chōngnyōnil kwa kinyōm' 국제 청년일과 기념, *Tonga ilbo*, 13 September 1925.

20 In his analysis of Koreans' 'education fever' for public schools run by the colonial state, O Söngch'öl 오성철 has ascribed the phenomenon to a desire for modernity and upward social mobility. Elementary school education often served as the basis for an individual colonial subject's social betterment. See O Söngch'öl, *Singminji pot'ong kyoyuk yön'gu* 식민지 보통교육 연구 (Seoul: Kyoyuk kwahaksa, 2000).

21 For studies that emphasise the individual and voluntary desires of the masses for education over the previous nationalist interpretation, see Cho Chöngbong, *ibid.* and Cho Chöngbong and Kim Minnam 김민남, 'Ilche ha yöngju chiyök nodong yahak e kwanhan Yöngju' 일제하 영주지역 노동야학에 관한 연구, *Han'guk kyoyuk 한국교육* 31.4 (2004): 53-71.

22 The main object of 'self-knowledge' of this period was Korea's experiences of modernity, which included nationalism but was far broader than that. See Han Kihyöng 한기형, 'Munhwa chongch'igi kömyöl ch'eje wa singminji midio' 문화정치기 검열체제와 식민지 미디어, *Taedong munhwa yön'gu* 51 (2005): 69-105 (from p.72), and Ch'ön Chönghwan 천정환, 'Samch'ölli ka 'kimilsil' ül yörossül ttae: chöngbo t'onggye ranün saeroun chisik kwa kündae chapchi' 삼천리가 '기밀실'을 열었을 때: 정보 통제라는 새로운 지식과 근대 잡지 in *Proceedings of the International Conference at the Academy of East Asian Studies at Songgunkwan University*. 성균관대학교 동아시아 학술원 국제 학술회의 자료 (Seoul: Sunggyunkwan University, 2010).

23 Students' strikes in colonial Korea reached their peak between 1925 and 1929: 72 cases were recorded in 1927; 83 in 1928; and 78 in 1929.

24 The New Science Research Group (Sinhüng kwahak yön'guhoe 신흥과학연구회), a socialist Korean organisation in Tokyo, issued this manifesto to support a strike at Kyöngsöng Girls Commercial High School (Kyöngsöng yöja sangöpp hakkyo 경성여자상업학교).

25 The Government General banned students' participation in public lectures and speeches and also secretly inspected what teachers read and did during their leisure time. See 'Hakseng üi sahoe kwahak yön'gu kümhu ro ilch'üng ch'wiche?' 학생의 사회과학 연구 금후로 일층 취체?, *Chosön ilbo*, 27 February 1928; 'Toköhoe susaek 13 myöng kömgö' 독서회 수색 13 명 검거, *Tonga ilbo*, 8 December 1928; and 'Kongsandang sagön kwan'gye wa sahoe kwahak yön'gu' 공산당 사건 관계와 사회과학 연구, *Tonga ilbo*, 17 April 1928.

discussion circles, and secret societies, as well as through the mobilisation of media.

Second, the colonial government suppressed the ideals and the content of modern public education by requiring their conformity to official policy. For this reason, many Koreans refused to take advantage of Japanese public education until the 1910s, although the masses later demanded that the state sponsor more of it.²⁰ That the colonised people demanded public education regulated by the imperialists hints at a possible contradiction between the popular desire for modern education and the drive for national liberation. The argument that Koreans wanted Japanese education only to resist colonial rule is likely an exaggerated nationalist claim. Rather, they would have wanted it in order to be treated as legitimate members of society.²¹ Education could thus enable both submission and resistance. The 'schizophrenia of the colonial' is closely tied to the ambiguity of colonial modernity.

Prior to the 1910 annexation, there was a strong demand for self-knowledge among the Korean people, but, on Japan's takeover of Korea, colonial authorities curbed its cultivation.²² The consequent strife and frustration became a major source of grievance in future conflicts. For example, 'Education in the Interests of the Korean People' was the key slogan of the students' strikes that swept the country from the late 1920s through the early 1930s.²³ The strikers openly addressed problems of discrimination by Japanese teachers and their insults against Korea and the Korean people. They also demanded more classes on Korean language, history, and geography to be included in their regular curriculum. In another instance, 'Absolute Resistance against the Colonial Slave Education!' was the slogan of the students' strike at Kyöngsöng Women's Commercial School (*Kyöngsöng yöja sangöpp hakkyo* 경성여자 상업학교) in February 1928.²⁴ The slogan succinctly shows the gap between colonial public education and the demands of the colonial masses. During the strikes, students attempted an open confrontation to protest against the form and content of the colonial 'teaching machine'. In the background were voluntary student organisations such as reading circles, and the spreading influence of socialist ideology. The reading circle phenomenon reached its peak during these years of strikes. Not surprisingly, the Government General intensified its surveillance and oppression of such student lecture meetings and speeches.²⁵

Public education can provide the basis for the formation of mass intellectuality. Education at the 'common' school, as elementary schools were called in the colonial era, provided the most rudimentary instruments of knowledge, while higher level public education could lay the groundwork for solidarity among the participants and for the formation of mass intellectuality. However, the state-sponsored education system did not encourage its formation, in and of itself, and the collective intelligence of the Korean masses also frequently came into conflict with the system or the state. In colonial Korea, the authorities tried to monopolise knowledge by repeatedly and harshly oppressing nationalist groups, their media, and journalist activism. Consequently, mass intellectuality in Korea formed without state sponsorship or even in spite of state obstruction. This spontaneous emergence was a distinctive and important attribute of the Korean formation of mass intellectuality.²⁶

The Four Different Types of Reading Circles and Their Sociocultural Characteristics

Reading circles in the 1920s can be divided into four types, according to their ideological orientation and the kind of members they attracted. Different types did overlap with one another to create further diversity in the types of reading circles, and the diversification reflected the sheer cultural complexity of the period.

First, there were the apolitical, spontaneous reading circles that formed in every walk of society. These sprung up naturally as print culture expanded. This type of reading circle included voluntary organisations formed by local celebrities, youths, peasants, women, or children, and it tended to have little ideological tone. In these circles, the members often used easy reading materials or magazines as their texts, rather than serious books.²⁷ This type of reading circle continued to thrive into the 1930s. For instance, during the police investigation of the so-called Party of the Cross (*Sipchagadang* 십자가당) in 1933, in which the renowned educator and journalist Namgung Ŏk (남궁억 1863–1939) was implicated, an organisation called ‘The Farmers’ Reading Circle’ (*Nonggun toksōhoe* 농군 독서회) came to light. The members were local youths, eighteen to 24 years of age, from Hongch’ŏn, Kangwŏn province. They stated their reasons for joining the circle as follows: ‘It is fun to communally purchase magazines, exchange them among members, and read together, and it also raises our spirit of unity’. The texts they read together were mostly children’s magazines, such as *Pyŏllara* 별나라, *Ŏrini* 어린이, and *Adong saenghwal* 아동생활.²⁸

The common reason for forming reading circles seems to have been the pursuit of a new kind of general knowledge. In 1923, for example, the members of an intellectual training unit of a local youth organisation in Ulsan, South Kyŏngsang province, gathered support from the local government, the private sector, and ‘comrades from all fields’ to launch the Ulsan Reading Circle (*Ulsan toksōhoe* 울산독서회). Their goal was to ‘develop learning and knowledge, improve our character, and study new thought’. They gathered once a week and ‘researched changes in economic thinking from a historical viewpoint’ at one meeting, and at another, ‘each member stated his opinion on the question of romantic love’.²⁹ These examples, along with their declared goal, illustrate that the members were pursuing general, rather than specialised, knowledge. In a broader context, this reading circle was partaking in the contemporary intellectual agenda of reorganising general common knowledge – a project pursued alongside the development of specialised disciplinary knowledge.

Even when the members of a reading circle did not particularly aim for ideological enlightenment or political organisation, ‘reading together’ was popular as an effective way to acquire knowledge. For this reason, after the late 1920s and even after reading circles came to be known as ‘dangerous organisations’, the apolitical types of reading circles still existed: ‘When one says “reading circles”, what easily comes to mind is the newspaper reports on “red” reading circles that were under police suppression and surveillance. But reading circles were also needed for practical purposes for us to acquire common and professional knowledge and also to study our favourite hobbies or new technologies.’³⁰ The momentum for progress in mass culture and knowledge was unstoppable.

26 Despite this early history, or perhaps because of it, education may have acquired its extraordinary significance (as symbolic capital) in modern Korean society. In other words, ‘education fever’ in today’s Korea can be seen, in a way, as an ironic side effect of the historical imbalance between the popular desire for education and its suppression by the state.

27 For instance, in October 1927, two reading circles were organised for young men and women in Sach’ŏn, South Kyŏngsang province. The reason for their organisation was cited as follows: ‘Rural youths should work hard on agricultural projects, but they also need to improve their knowledge by subscribing to magazines’. See ‘Yang toksōhoe chojik, puin nongch’ŏng’ 양 독서회 조직, 부인 농정, *Tonga ilbo*, 13 October 1927.

28 ‘Hongch’ŏn kyŏngch’alsŏ Yi Ponggyun and Namgung Hyŏn sinmun chosŏ’ 홍천경찰서 「李鳳均 신문조서」 및 「南宮現 신문조서」, in *Hanminjok tongnip undongsa charyojip* 한민족 독립운동사 자료집, Vol.47, ed. Kuksa p’yŏnch’an wiwŏnhoe 국사편찬위원회, online at <<http://db.history.go.kr/url.jsp?ID=hd047r002000200150>>.

29 ‘Ulsan toksŏgye ūi hosŏ’ 울산 독서계의 호소, *Chosŏn ilbo*, 2 October 1923.

30 Kim Yungyŏng 김윤경, ‘Yŏhakseang ūi toksŏ hyŏnsang haebu’ 여학생의 독서현상 해부, *Sin kajŏng* 신가정, October 1934, 47.

- 31 Yi Yöśöng 이역성 and Kim Seyong 김세용, *Sujja Chosön yön'gu* 수자조선연구 (Seoul: Segwansa, 1930) 2: 117.
- 32 'Pyöngyang owöl ch'öngnyöhoe toksöhoe üi sahoejuüi küi ül oein sagön kongp'an' 平壤五月青年會 讀書會의 社會主義 글을 외인 事件公判, *Tonga ilbo*, 25 July 1925.
- 33 'Tosöbu sinsöl, Tanch'ön Hajahoe sö' 圖書部 新設, 端川 하자會서, *Tonga ilbo*, 15 August 1925. The name of the reading circle, 'Haja', means 'Let's do it'.

The second type of reading circle was organised by working-class youths who were peasants or blue-collar labourers. These reading circles were byproducts of youth groups that developed in the 1920s and were linked to various kinds of social movement groups, whether they be nationalist, Christian, or socialist. Reading circles of this type were initially affiliated, directly or indirectly, with the cultural nationalist movement, but many of them gradually turned leftist in later years. What, then, was the place of reading circles in contemporary labourers' cultural lives? This question is closely related to the larger question of what impact socialism had on labourers. More specifically, the question concerns the cultural state, including the illiteracy rate, and economic conditions of the working class and the culture of labour unions. As of 1928, a survey on the literacy rate among the working class shows that 57.2 per cent had no schooling at all; 23.8 per cent attended traditional village schools; and 7.6 per cent went to elementary school but did not finish.³¹ In sum, about 88 per cent of the working class were completely illiterate or half-illiterate. Only 11.4 per cent had completed elementary school or higher. The numbers were slightly lower than the national average shown in the 1930s tax survey. How, then, was the nationwide 'reading circle phenomenon' possible?

Reading has a correlative relationship with the reader's cultural attributes (level of education, professional specialisation, experience of general liberal education, and so on) and with the type and intensity of his labour. Class differences in reading might not necessarily correspond with a person's income level or political tendencies but rather with the ratio of leisure time to working hours and their schedules. In general, the longer the working hours and the more intense the labour, the less prone a person is to pick up a book. Members of the working class could not read books but not necessarily because they were financially unable to afford them or they lacked training. Basically, no capitalist society is generous enough to allow its working class to enjoy the leisure activity of reading. To introduce reading into the leisure time of the working class, the development of a subversive culture and special pedagogy is necessary. These prerequisites can occur as an outcome of social activism, and their development is a 'movement' in and of itself. In this light, we may grasp why reading circles were formed for the working class in the 1920s, despite widespread illiteracy and the workers' low income.

Let us now take a look at some relevant newspaper reports. In July 1924, the working-class members of the May Reading Circle (*Owöl toksöhoe* 5월 독서회) in Pyongyang were arrested for 'reading socialist texts at the reading circle' and were charged with violating the national security law. The members, however, stated the purpose of such reading circles as follows: 'We are proletarian youths who labour every day. We cannot get an education at school like everybody else, so we gather every Saturday for an hour in the afternoon and read for the purpose of improving our knowledge.'³² Also, the reading club of the Hajahoe 하자회 in Tanch'ön, South Hamgyöng province stated that: 'because the members of the organisation are proletarian, their financial situation does not allow for purchasing new books at this time. So they have decided to first collect books of ideas owned by individual members and then also appeal to local dignitaries for support.'³³

It seems that despite the high illiteracy rate, printed words were widely used as a means to convey the goals of the labour movement. Labour unions and other labour organisations across the regions routinely made use of

various flyers, manifestos, and pamphlets.³⁴ Workers themselves produced wall newspapers, regular newspapers, periodicals, and newsletters. If one takes into consideration the fact that word of mouth and ‘rumours’ were still utilised as supplementary means of communication in popular culture at the time, the wide usage of writing is likely to have been motivated by more than circumstantial necessity. Producing one’s own writing was an act of exercising the highest level of literacy. For this reason, workers’ literary creations acquired weighty significance. Here we may recall the hegemonic power of print culture and the social respect for printed words.

The third type of reading circle was linked to middle- and high-school student organisations. These reading circles were related to all kinds of socialist movements involving middle school, high school, and college students. Student reading circles were most actively formed from 1926 to 1931, and these reading circles became the foundation for student movements, such as strikes. Most of the arrestees who were charged with violating the Peace Preservation Law (*Ch’ian yujibŏp* 치안 유지법) were members of student reading circles. Not only in the 1931 case of the Anti-Imperialist Union (*Panjetongmaeng* 반제 동맹) at Keijō Imperial University (*Kyōngsōng cheguk taehak* 경성 제국 대학), which involved elite intellectuals, but also in all local student movements, reading circles served as catalysts. Large-scale anti-imperialist resistance movements, such as the 1926 June Tenth movement and the 1929 Kwangju Student movement, for instance, were led by student-organised reading circles. Especially in the latter case, the reading circle that was involved had a big enough organisational network to parallel the local chapter of the New Korea Society (*Sin’ganhoe* 신간회).³⁵ In such cases, reading circles were part of socialist culture and resistance organisations. Hence, as is the case with ‘red’ reading circles (*chōksaek toksōhoe* 적색 독서회), reading circles were often equated with secret resistance societies.

In retrospect, student reading circles must have played a decisive role in forming the traditions of the Korean student movement and in popularising socialist culture. In other words, joining a reading circle was the first step in becoming a critical intellectual or being initiated into a radical ideology. Despite common misperceptions, reading was not a mere everyday routine but was a new name for ‘freedom’ and ‘politics’.³⁶

The fourth and last type is the reading circle of leftist intellectuals. This type of reading circle had a lot in common with the student reading circles discussed previously. Yet, at the same time, intellectuals’ reading circles had their own unique characteristics, such as a belief in the autonomy of knowledge, the pursuit of complete knowledge, theoretical sophistication, and abstract idealism. The history of the socialist movement is that of ideas and doctrinal debates, which accompanied the people’s struggles to establish exclusive legitimacy for an avant-garde party or party line. In this historical perspective, reading circles played a crucial role in cultivating avant-garde intellectuals, and this role was further strengthened in the 1930s, as reading circles increasingly came to serve as the main site for outlawed oppositional and socialist activism.³⁷

Gender in the Socialist Movement and Reading Circles

‘Reading together’ was a kind of ritual and an event. The members of reading circles often underwent a transformation through their group activities.

34 See Kim Kyōngil 김경일, *Han’guk kūndae nodongsa wa nodong undong* 한국 근대 노동사와 노동 운동 (Seoul: Munhak kwa chisōngsa, 2004), and *Ilche ha nodong undongsa* 일제하 노동운동사 (Seoul: Ch’angjak kwa pip’yōng, 1992).

35 Kim Sōngmin, pp.39 and 52.

36 The tradition of student reading circles continued in postliberation Korea, and numerous South Korean intellectuals would recall their experience of participating in reading circles during their school days as an important beginning of their social activism or the political trauma they experienced.

37 For example, in the so-called Kyōngsōng Troika movement (경성 트로이카 운동) in the early 1930s, an underground movement led by Yi Chaeyu 이재유 (1905–44) for the rebuilding of the Korean Communist Party, reading circles served as one of its main strategies to recruit intellectual activists and also to cultivate new organisational cells. See Kim Kyōngil 김경일, Yi Chaeyu, *Na ūi sidae na ūi hyōngmyōng* 이재유, 나의 시대 나의 혁명 (Seoul: P’urūn yōksa, 2006).

38 Yi Hyosök 이효석, 'Orion kwa imgŭm' 오리온과 임금 (林檎). *Samchöllli* 삼천리, June 1926, pp.105-109.

39 *Ibid.*, p.106.

40 *Ibid.*, p.106.

41 *Ibid.*, p.105.

42 Ch'oe Ina 최인아, 'Nammae' 남매, *Pyölgöngon* 별건곤, Feb. 1930, pp. 116-25.

In places of enlightenment where people read together, social classes, genders, and generations of people were (re)organised. Even their bodies might change. The power of reading circles as a movement came precisely from this. 'Reading as a movement' was not an intellectual activity that was isolated from other life experiences, nor was it merely one aspect of traditional customs. Rather, it was a new form of human communication that integrated knowledge and practice. Joining a socialist reading circle, in particular, was an act of overall 'consciousness-raising' about the world and one's own existence. And because it was subject to police oppression, it was also a high-risk activity that could quite possibly change the course of one's life.

Some novels of the 1920s provide us with a glimpse into the significance of reading circles as popular cultural symbols, as well as into individual interactions within important sites of socialist culture. One such example is Yi Hyosök's (이효석 1907-42) *The Orion and the Apple* (Orion kwa imgŭm 오리온과 임금 林檎).³⁸ At the time of its publication, Yi was a so-called fellow traveller, or a socialist sympathiser.

The narrative centres around Naomi, a young woman 'of a different blood' — that is, a Japanese — who works as 'a clerk at some department store' and joins a reading circle consisting of 'socialists from all levels', ranging from students to female factory workers and clerks. The members of the circle read a certain text in its original language — in German, which insinuates the Marxist nature of the text — under the guidance of the narrator, 'I'. The problem is that Naomi 'does not have one speck of proletarian character and it is quite dubious what kind of proletarian fighter she should make in the future'.³⁹ 'I' infers thus because Naomi is 'such a beautiful, extravagant and "modern" girl'.⁴⁰ Her presence in the socialist reading circle seems to be in stark contrast to her 'magnificent' physical appearance, and this contrast foreshadows Yi's aesthetic of irony or reversal later on. 'I' is enchanted by her beauty at first sight, and in return, she expresses her fondness for him in an open and lively fashion. Yet as time goes on, 'I' finds Naomi more and more mysterious and uncontrollable.

'I's fatal attraction for Naomi goes beyond the physical allure of her 'very slender body, light lips and amazingly expressive eyes'.⁴¹ Her charm partly derives from the first-person narrator's gratifying confirmation of the power of ideology that could affect the Other (the modern girl): he is attracted to her for their shared ideology. This inscrutable being with an enchanting body, however, turns out to have a power that goes beyond the narrator's complacent self-identification with her. Her power affects him even where his ideology does not prevail. Yi's narrative shows Naomi trying to seduce 'I' with talk of proletarian ethics. This is a convenient way of resolving the male intellectual's dilemma over the charms and troubles of 'women who can read': the socialist intellectual manages to keep his ideological integrity intact while pursuing a love interest. Naomi's 'socialist' allure is indeed a sweet fantasy of male intellectuals.

A similar narrative phenomenon is observed in *Nammae* 남매 by Choe Ina 최인아.⁴² Its heroine, Hyesuk 혜숙, is a clerk at 'the electricity department of XX office' and a sort of a 'depraved' modern girl who loves to watch motion pictures. Hyesuk is in love, albeit unrequited, with her friend's brother Talchin 달진, who is a 'solid' socialist and a coachman. Talchin, however, hates Hyesuk because he thinks she is corrupting his younger sister. The story is a miniature illustration of the many complex issues of 1930s Korean society, as it gives representation to the new mass culture and its middle-class

consumers, the new personality types created by colonial capitalist development; modern femininity entangled with snobbish 'petit-bourgeois desires'; and a socialist's value judgments about all of these. The sticky situation of a socialist's sister's single motherhood finds a rather easy solution. Talchin not only forgives his sister's transgressions but also accepts Hyesuk, all because Hyesuk has an epiphany and decides to join his reading circle. He is apparently moved by Hyesuk's letter asking to let her join the reading circle: 'Yes, we should always help prepare each other for the day when we would rapidly march forward toward a common goal'... . He exclaimed with joy, because now he has a new comrade.⁴³

43 *Ibid.*, p.125.

Stories of this kind seem to have sprung from the innocent belief (which was a fantasy) that socialism and the socialist movement can save humanity from its crisis of 'corruption' and decadence. At the same time, these stories are also interesting for their representation of how various cultural subjects who belonged to different classes and had different senses of identity encountered and interacted with one another in reading circles at that time. The stories show that the socialist culture that was represented by reading circles existed within the blooming capitalist culture of the 1930s, when bourgeois snobbism and modern aestheticism were fast becoming mainstream. The stories also suggest that socialist culture was potent enough to effectively compete with its rivals.

Interestingly and problematically, literary representations of the confrontation between socialist culture and its rivals always take a gendered form. Even when armed with ideological conviction, the male protagonist can prove himself only through the existence of female antagonists. In a male-oriented narrative, the woman who reads is likely depicted as promiscuous or gender-neutral and even masculine. On which side she stands would depend on how much knowledge-authority man has over her. This patriarchal tendency is countered in leftist literary works of the late 1930s, when the socialist movement went dormant under the authorities' intensified oppression, with leftist writers suffering from an identity crisis caused by their forced ideological recantation, commonly known as 'conversion' (*chŏnhyang* 전향).

As we have discussed so far, in colonial Korean novels, joining a reading circle or withdrawing from one is symbolic of an individual's existential trajectory toward or away from the socialist movement. Yet in the novelistic encounters among different cultural subjects, we also find a kind of excess that is produced when reading circles expand beyond the struggle to achieve a coherent centralised party and its ascetic political principles. What happened when modern women with their splendid bodies came to read books together with uneducated and rough-mannered workers and self-proclaimed avant-garde intellectuals? Needless to say, it is in this kind of excess that the core of socialist culture, culture as a revolutionary project, lies.

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