

Images of Russia and the Soviet Union in Modern Korea, 1880s-1930s: An Overview*

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In early modern Korea, the image of Russia/the Soviet Union tended to vacillate between two extremes. On the one hand, there was a strong tendency to see Russia as an immediate threat to Korea. This view – to a certain degree influenced by the hostility towards Imperial Russia common in the governmental spheres and media of Meiji Japan – was largely shared by many pro-Japanese reformists in the 1880s-1890s (Yu Kilchun and his characterization of Russia as a “predatory wolf” typifies the ideas of this group), and prompted calls for cooperation with Japan and/or unifying all three main East Asian states (Japan, China, Korea) into a “Yellow coalition” able to fend off “the white Russian predators.” A good example of such a view was the treatise *On the Oriental Peace* penned by Itō Hirobumi’s (1841-1909) assassin, An Chunggūn (1879-1910). This view was inherited by some of the right-wingers of the colonial period who developed it into fierce anti-Sovietism, typically Yun Ch’iho (1865-1945) and Yi Kwangsu (1892-1950). Yun Ch’iho went as far as to welcome Mussolini’s success in “protecting Italy from Bolshevism” and wishing Hitler a victory over Soviet Russia. On the other hand, there were always political forces that tended to view Russia/the Soviet Union as Korea’s potential protector or even savior. Emperor Kojong (r. 1864-1907) pinned great hopes on Russian help several times during his turbulent reign (notably, in 1885-86, 1896-97 and 1904-07) and a number of Korean nationalists found sanctuary in Russia after their country was annexed by Japan in 1910. After 1917, some of them (notably Yi Tonghūi) reinvented themselves as Communists, and launched upon a course of struggle for Korea’s liberation with

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Soviet assistance. For the Communists, the Soviet Union was utopia itself in the process of materialization, and criticism of the USSR (Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics – Soviet Union) was often deliberately avoided. Some radical nationalists, however, managed to balance their respect for Socialist ideals with healthy criticism of certain Soviet politics – especially those seen as betraying the USSR’s own proclaimed ideals of anti-imperialism and solidarity with the colonial and semi-colonized nations (for example, a military conflict with republican China in 1929). Some of the Soviet policies of the late 1930s, typically the forced deportation of the Soviet Koreans in 1937, were met with frustration and a sense of betrayal. But on balance, the general view of the Soviet Union was much more positive than that of Imperial Russia – undoubtedly both on account of the USSR’s avowed anti-imperialist and anti-colonial policies and due to the enormous hopes pinned upon the socialist road to “progress” by Korean intellectuals frustrated by the colonial capitalism of the Japanese Empire. This unrealistically positive view of the USSR was the background against which many Korean non-Communist intellectuals chose moving to North Korea after the division of the country in the late 1940s – a decision which often led to personal tragedies afterwards. The tendency to idealize the USSR was also strongly discernible in the progressive movement in South Korea in the 1980s, and as a result of this, the implosion of the Soviet bloc in 1989-1991 largely destroyed the intellectual credibility of South Korean radicals.

Keywords: Russia, Soviet Union, Yu Kilchun, Socialism, modernization

Introduction: Russia as an ‘ambivalent Other’

Today, more than thirty years have lapsed since Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) once and forever changed our understanding of how, when and by whom the stereotypic image of the “timeless, feminine and passive” Orient was formed. Now it is commonplace to say that the images of the ethno-confessional and national “Others” produced by societal elites tend to conform more to the needs and ambitions of these elites than to “objective” reality – if the existence of such a reality may be postulated at all. It is commonly understood now, at least inside the field of Asian studies, that the formation of Orientalist discourse in the West was matched by changing perceptions within the countries victimized by imperialism, where modernizing elites were increasingly inclined to view the “West” simultaneously as *the* hegemonic or/and aggressive force and *the* model of a “rational,” “modern” society (see, for example, Bonnett 2002; Hutchinson 2002; Spencer 2003). In Korea, from the earliest direct contacts with the USA and European countries from the early 1880s onward, the “westernizing” intellectuals tended to regard the modern Western concept of “civilization” as *the* universal yardstick (Shin 2006, 28).

While the “Western powers” were seen as embodiments of “civilization and progress,” their aggression was – in a Social Darwinist and self-Orientalizing way – explained as Koreans’ own collective fault. Korea itself was to be blamed, since it was visibly unable to live up to the standards of militaristic grandeur supposedly set by its own “glorious ancient history,” and was losing the “battle for survival” in modernity’s Darwinist jungles (Jager 2003, 3-43). However, the “naturalness” of the Western – or Japanese, in Korea’s case – aggression did not necessarily make it more appealing and attractive for its victims. Thus, the early modern Korean images of the West and Japan often betray an inherent tension, since the Koreans were now expected to learn the universal “civilization norms” from their very own actual or potential victimizers.

Korea’s modernizing intelligentsia used to regard “the West” in its entirety as the “fountainhead of civilization” *par excellence*. However, its image was not undifferentiated. From the very beginning of their direct contacts with Western interlocutors in the 1880s, Korean diplomats were acutely aware of the complicated web of interstate relations between the “civilized powers.” After all, the interstate treaties – with the US (1882), Great Britain (1883), Germany (1883), Italy (1884), Russia (1884) and France (1886) – were to be negotiated and concluded with the different states individually, and it was precisely those treaties that gave Korea hope it might be included in the new, “civilized” system of international relations (Lee Keun-Gwan 2008). The overall image of the “West,” thus, was in the end also the sum of the images of the individual “Western powers.” Those images, naturally enough, differed a lot from each other.

Much of the Korean imagery of the West on the whole and Russia in particular was strongly influenced by pre-existing Japanese views – for many of Korea’s modernizing intellectuals, who either studied in Japan or learned Japanese at home, Japanese was the main medium for familiarizing themselves with the modern world (Chaeil Han’guk yuhaksaeng yŏnhaphoe 1988; Hō 2009, 31-44). The modern Japanese images of Russia used to be deeply ambivalent and often self-contradicting. A “later developer” habitually “orientalized” in popular Western discourses (Neumann 2004), Russia was often contrasted with Meiji Japan as a relatively “backward” country compared to the “centers of civilization” in Western Europe. Simultaneously, despite its “backwardness,” it was seen as a major military power, and – due both to its territorial proximity, supposed “special aggressiveness” and, from the mid-1890s, overlapping interests in Korea and Manchuria – as a major “threat” to Japan itself. The view of Russia emphasizing its insatiable

“aggressiveness” reached the peak of its popularity in the days of the 1904-1905 Russo-Japanese War, when such pictures as, for example, a caricaturized image of the Russian emperor as a voracious “men-eating devil” were to be found among the newspaper cartoons of the time (Mikhailova 2000). However, “the other Russia” of literary writers, critical intellectuals and revolutionaries was a major source of inspiration for Meiji Japanese intellectuals, especially liberals and radicals. Tolstoy (1828-1910) and Turgenev (1818-1883) were of foremost importance in shaping Japan’s modern literature after 1880s – and sixty-five books on Russia’s revolutionary populism (*narodnichestvo*) were published in Japan in 1881-1883 alone, newspapers in the 1880s-1910s being commonly filled with accounts (often very sympathetic) of the radical activities in Russia (Konishi 2007; Rimer (ed.) 1995). Many of the essential features of Japan’s modern views on Russia – for example, accentuation of Imperial Russia’s socio-political “backwardness” and international “aggressiveness,” together with sympathy towards all those risking their lives and freedom to struggle against such an abusive government – are identifiable, as we will see below, in modern Korean interpretations of Russia as well.

While certainly grounded in reality – autocratic Imperial Russia undoubtedly did not measure up to its own chosen Western models of modernization in socio-political and economical respects (on the degree of its economic backwardness, see Stepanov 1993), while behaving in a provocatively expansionist way (common, however, to most Western European powers of the “high imperialism” times) – the views on Russia of the kind outlined above should be classified as stereotypes. They conform to the classic definition of “stereotype” – a pre-conception, which shapes the image of the world in the minds of people who are unable or/and unwilling to check its truthfulness themselves (Lippmann 1922, 95-156). As we know from social psychology, “out-group” stereotypes are likely to be based on the three main dimensions of the inter-group relations – relative power, relative status, and relative goal compatibility (Alexander et. al. 1999). High status and visibly strong “Others” with supposedly incompatible goals are likely to be seen as potential “aggressors” (“imperialists”), while equal status and power together with compatible goals usually match a definition of an “ally” (Alexander et. al, 2005). However, with the available information on the Western powers – Russia among them – being still extremely limited, perceptions of the relative power, status and goals of the Western interlocutors were all conditioned by the sources the early Korean modernist intellectuals had access to. Furthermore, they were conditioned also by their own political sympathies, antipathies and interests: class, religious, or personal.

Viewed from Korea: Russia's Power, Status and Goals

1. Power – Strength and Weakness Combined?

Russia's relative power used to be perceived as particularly high, often in a somewhat exaggerated way. A typical example of such exaggeration is the view of Russia developed by Yu Kilchun (1856-1914) – one of the first Korean disciples of Japan's famed modernizer Fukuzawa Yukichi (1835-1901) who also briefly studied in the USA in 1883-1884 and then was one of the key decision-makers in the Korean reformist governments in 1894-1896 (his standard biography is Yu 1987). In his *Treatise on the Main Tendencies of the World* (*Segye taeseron*), a concise work thought to be an abstract of the encyclopedic *Records of a Journey to the West* (Söyu kyönmun, 1895), Yu Kilchun characterizes Russia as “a great state of the world, competing in Europe against Britain, France, Germany and Austria” (Yu 1971, Vol. 3, 81). That Russia was a mighty member of the “concert of powers,” was its central characteristic for late nineteenth – early twentieth century Korean intellectuals. In the *Records of a Journey to the West*, Russia's power was measured with the quintessentially modern method of statistics. Russia was named as the country possessing the highest number of warships in the whole world (supposedly 379 against Great Britain's 227) and the highest number of soldiers and officers in the standing army (780,081 against France's 502,866 or Germany's 427,241) (Yu 2004 [1895], 272-273). The book, which primarily dealt with the Western European and American institutions of “advanced civilization” and constitutional governance, only rarely mentioned Russia – the chapters on military and military might being one of the few exceptions.

Similarly alarmist was the view of Russia developed and articulated by Min Yöngwan (1861-1905) – the courtier and diplomat, who, unlike Yu Kilchun (whose foreign experiences were mainly limited to Japan, the US and several Western European countries) visited Russia himself twice as Korea's envoy, in 1896 and 1897. In his major treatise on the diplomatic and other tasks for Korea, *One Thousand [Worries of a Fool] and One [Good] Measure* (*Ch'önilch'aek*), thought to have been written around 1897 (Yi 2001a, 107), Min Yöngwan described Russia as “the strongest country in the world, unrivalled in its military strength.” He specified that Russia's “660,000 men-strong standing army and 368 military ships” were an immediate threat against the whole of East Asia with the planned completion of the Trans-Siberian railroad. Russia was, in his opinion, a force-worshipping country bent on

invading its neighbors – a “modern-day Qin Empire, which has already destroyed Poland, invaded Turkey and conquered Central Asia.” Finding ways to block the threat of a Russian invasion was thus Korea’s diplomatic task number one (Min 1971, 52).

If Russia was so powerful and threatening, then how could its defeat by Japan in the fateful Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905), which then led to the colonization of Korea by the Japanese, be explained? It looks as if the most popular explanation was the “unparalleled bravery” of the Japanese, together with Japan’s “unprecedented success” in modernizing themselves, rather than any hidden weakness on the part of Russia. Chang Chiyön (1864-1921), an important reformist Confucian who, as the president of a popular daily, *Hwangsöng sinmun* (1901-1906), played a central role in Korea’s nascent journalism in the beginning of the twentieth century, wrote in his treatise on military matters, *On the Military* (*Pyöngnon*; thought to have been written toward the end of the first decade of the twentieth century), that the Russian army, “the most feared in the world” was defeated in Manchuria by the Japanese only due to the latter’s “special bravery.” The Japanese were able to “choose death and forget about their personal lives,” and that was decisive for their battlefield fortunes (Chang 1971, 227). Another polemist, writing under the pseudonym Paeksan kösa in the reformist Confucian monthly *Taedong hakhoe wölbo*, characterized Russia as an “invincible country of deep plans and profound intentions.” He further suggested that Japan’s success in defeating it and “saving East Asia from devastation” was made possible only by a complete mobilization of all available resources (Paeksan kösa 1908, 25). Interestingly enough, even after its defeat in the Russo-Japanese War, Korean commentators habitually emphasized the “unmatched military strength” of the Russians. A 1908 editorial article in a Korean intellectual monthly comparing the strength of various “powers,” for example, highlighted Russia’s superiority in the number of its peacetime standing troops (“42,000 officers and more than 1.1 million soldiers”) (Kakkuk kungnyök pigyo 1908, 15). Even defeated and deprived of any vestiges of its erstwhile influence on Korean affairs, Russia still looked formidable – or perhaps that was how some Korean nationalists, wishing Russia to counterbalance Japan and prevent it from fully colonizing Korea, *wanted* to see it.

Post-revolutionary Russia, greatly and visibly weakened by the catastrophic experiences of an almost four year long (1918-1922) civil war resulting in hunger and societal collapse, was no longer directly associated with “military strength” in the discourse of Korean intellectuals. The revolution was typically seen by an émigré nationalist leader of reformist Confucian background, Pak

Ŭnsik (1859-1925), as “the signal shot of global reconstruction, the new spring of humanity” (Pak 1973 [1920], 128), and Russia was now “the place on which the attention of the whole world was now being concentrated” (Tŏgwŏl Sanin 1926, 46), but only by the virtue of the unprecedented socio-political experiment it ventured into. For the Korean intellectuals of the 1920s, Russians could no longer project the threatening image of “white domination.” The Russians who were most visible for the Korean observers, namely the Russian population of Harbin, came under Chinese rule with the abolition of Tsarist Russia’s extra-territorial privileges following the 1917 October Revolution. They were to suffer occasional mistreatment at the hands of the Chinese police and soldiery, and were considered on an equal footing with the Chinese population of the city, prompting hysterical cries about the supposed “loss of white prestige” in the China-based Anglophone press (Carter 2001, 91-109). Several large parties of anti-revolutionary Russian refugees (mostly soldiers and officers of the “white,” counter-revolutionary armies and their family members) also arrived at the port of Wŏnsan on the Korean East Sea (Sea of Japan) coast in October-November 1922. All in all, around ten thousand of these “white Russians” passed through Korea, but only about one to two hundred remained in Kyŏngsŏng (today’s Seoul) and other Korean cities by the end of the 1920s, the majority having settled in the émigré Russian centres of Harbin and Shanghai (Volkov 2001). Korea-based Russian émigrés of the 1920s-1930s were – with very few exceptions, like the family of Sergei Chirkin (1875-1943), Tsarist Russia’s former Consul to Seoul, or Yankovsky’s noblemen clan that ran a prestigious resort called “Noviny” near Ch’ŏngjin (Clark 1994) – mostly composed of impoverished artisans and petty traders (Chirkin 2003).

Poverty and general powerlessness also meant that the female segment of the Russian refugee community in East Asia was exposed to public eroticization and sexual mistreatment. Further into the 1930s, destitute Russian females in Harbin cafes and restaurants providing erotic “services” (“dance shows” etc) to or even being simply sexually exploited by visiting Japanese and wealthy middle-class Korean tourists were often mentioned in Korean colonial fiction and essays – for example, in Yi Hyosŏk’s (1907-1942) travelogues and novels. Typically, his novel *Wanderers’ Sorrow* (*Yŏsu*: serialized in *Tonga Ilbo*, November 29 – December 28, 1939) sympathetically depicts a wandering performance group mostly consisting of Harbin-based Russian émigrés – harassed by the Japanese police on their Korean tour and underpaid by the Korean cinema hall owner who contracted them. The stateless Russian protagonists of the novel embody a borderless *weltschmerz* of sorts, their

endless humiliations reflecting the fundamentally tragic essence of human existence (Yi 2006, 283-367). The ability of the Japanese Empire to turn the erstwhile “white predators” into inferior – and even occasionally eroticized – objects was celebrated by some authors while others, like Yi Hyosök, pitied the fate of the helpless Russian women in the hands of the Japanese machos. In any case, Russians seemed to have forever left the ranks of the “white overlords” of the world (Yi 2009).

However, unrelated to the notorious plight of the denationalized Russians in Harbin, perceptions of a new, Communist-ruled Russia as a “mighty giant” gradually returned in the early 1930s, due to the noticeable successes of the five-year plans and Stalin’s accelerated industrialization. It is not that the price Russian society, primarily its peasantry, had to pay for the industrial *grandeur* of the Stalin age, was completely unknown to Korea’s reading public. An in-depth interview with two Soviet soldiers, Ivan Yakovlevich Nakhlov and Pyotr Makarovich Ivanov, who defected to the Japanese during the Soviet-Japanese border clashes near Lake Khasan in July-August 1938, painted, for example, a rather realistic picture of half-hungry “collectivized” villages plundered by the artificially low state purchase prices for agricultural products and terrorized by the secret police (OGPU,¹ and after 1934 its successor, GUGB² under the NKVD³) (Kwön et. al. 1938). However, the industrial successes brought about by the process of the ruthless state exploitation of the *kolkhoz* (collective farm) peasantry won much wider publicity in Korea. Already in 1930, in the second year of the first five-year plan, an anonymous author (who preferred to hide his identity under a pen name, Ilgija) in the popular monthly *Pyölgön’gon* described the “Red Russian transformation” as historic – for the first time in Russian history, the industrial output exceeded the agrarian output! He further predicted that, despite all the pressure from its “capitalist neighbors,” the “Red Russians,” under Stalin’s leadership, would continue their march towards the establishment of an industrial Communist society (Ilgija 1930). And in 1934, an editorial in the respectable bourgeois daily *Tonga Ilbo* praised the successes of Soviet weapon production, which was seen to have made Russia into a first-class world power once again (Pisangsi segye üi kunsu kongöp chönmang ogaenyön kyehoek kwa kunsu kongöp üi

1. OGPU – Joint State Political Directorate (Rus. Ob’edinennoe gosudarstvennoe politicheskoe upravlenie)

2. GUGB – Main Directorate of State Security (Rus. Glavnoe upravlenie gosudarstvennoi bezopasnosti)

3. NKVD – People’s Commissars for Internal Affairs (Rus. Narodnyi Komissariat Vnutrennykh Del)

paltal Rosŏap'yŏn 1934). While the theme of the “Communist experiment” completely dominated Russia-related coverage in the 1920s, Korean journals and newspapers of the later 1930s started to view Russia also as a significant world power, able to defend itself against its rivals.

2. Status – “Backward,” “Advanced,” or just “Normal?”

While Russia’s position as a “universally feared world power” was both intimidating and somewhat enviable for Korean reformists of the late nineteenth to early twentieth century, completely captivated as they were by the ideals of a “rich state, strong army,” its pre-1917 socio-political status was, on the other hand, far from the desirable “civilized” standards. Russia’s “autocracy/despotism” contrasted sharply with the constitutional politics of all other European powers. Quite predictably, Korea’s modernizing intelligentsia viewed Russian politics as hopelessly backward, almost “non-Western.” Yu Kilchun’s *Treatise on the Main Tendencies of the World* succinctly defined Russia as a “monarchy” and further explained that the monarch’s power there was “absolute” – he treated “his” country as his “private property” (Yu 1971, Vol. 3, 17, 81). In his *Records of a Journey to the West*, Russia’s absolutism was deemed to be on the same level as that of Turkey, Korea, China and Japan. It was hardly a flattering portrayal, given Yu Kilchun’s stated belief that the British-styled constitutional monarchy was the most reasonable form of government and that absolutist governments were unable to check the abuses of power and incapable of inspiring the patriotic devotion of their subjects. Of course, Yu was against an immediate granting of political rights to the “ignorant and unprepared masses” and generally thought that the level of political advancement was bound to be commensurate with the level of educational achievements of the population. Thus, he hardly intended to criticize Russia for being an absolutist state. He simply noticed its inferior position on the universal scale of “civilization and progress” (Yu 2004 [1895], 172-177). It did not mean that Yu Kilchun, a faithful servant to Korea’s own absolute monarchy, could not find any redeeming features in the absolutist systems. In an unpublished manuscript entitled *Political Science (Chŏngch’ihak*; thought to have been loosely based on the Japanese translation of the lectures delivered by Karl Rathgen at Tokyo Imperial University in 1882-1892), he spoke approvingly of the political stability produced by an “ordered dynastic succession.” He concluded that in a world where the strong devours the weak, autocratic Russia was posed to devour the weakling Poland, with its “ineffective and cliquish” system of elected kings (quoted in Kim 2000a, 77-78).

The Russian revolution of 1905-1907 showed, however, that the Russian autocracy was far from being as “stable” as it might look on the surface. The revolutionaries were seen as “civilizers” of sorts – the fighters for the proverbial “freedom and people’s rights” – and largely sympathized with, following the contemporaneous Japanese patterns mentioned above. A famed memoirist, Chŏng Kyo (1856-1925), described the “Russian nihilists” in a 1908 article as the “people who [are] committed to overthrowing the Imperial House and making Russia a republic, the people whose ideals are deep, whose roots are strong and who will not be easily defeated” (Chŏng 1908, 65). Kil Sŭngik, a Korean student in Japan, wrote a year later on the “self-sacrificial and tragic struggle of the Russian nihilists, which resonates all over the world” (Kil 1909, 16). And when the Bolshevik heirs of the Russian revolutionary tradition took power in October 1917, they were greeted with a significant degree of approval not only by committed radicals, but also by a significant segment of the Korean non-Communist intelligentsia. A long article in the mouthpiece of the Shanghai Provisional Government, *Tongnip sinmun*, described Russia’s “bourgeois” Provisional Government of February-October 1917 as incompetent, unpopular and beholden to the continuation of the hated world war. At the same time, the Russian Constituent Assembly (January 5-6, 1918) was seen as paralyzed by the struggle between the socialist and capitalist parties and then rightfully dissolved by the Bolsheviks. Lenin, however, was regarded as the leader who steered Russia toward the nationalization and fair distribution of land, workers’ control over factories, and a dictatorship of the proletarians in politics (Ch’ŏnjae 1920).

Both mainstream and somewhat left-leaning (but not outright Communist) intellectual monthlies of 1920s Korea tended to contrast the “Red Russia” to the “Tsarist realm of darkness and oppression” and picture it as a socio-political experiment of enormous world-historical significance. For example, the laws on an eight-week maternity leave and breastfeeding breaks for working mothers, the abolition of the legal discrimination against children born out of wedlock, liberal marriage laws, and efforts to eradicate prostitution were understood as signs that the “New Russia” was rapidly becoming a “paradise for women,” a unique country of gender equality (Sinhŭngguk ũi sinyŏsŏng, *sinhŭng Nosŏa ũi yŏsŏng* 1930). A non-Communist commentator in 1930 described Stalin as a “man of resolute will, whose succinct and clear phrases, completely free from rhetoric, move the hearts of the listeners,” and approvingly mentioned his policies of accelerated industrialization and collectivization (Yi 1930). Another lengthy article, drawing on Bernard Shaw’s immensely favorable impressions of early 1930s Soviet life, described Soviet

Russia as a country of unique Socialist pedagogy where children are not beaten – and cited Stalin’s criticism of the inhumane practices of corporal punishment in Britain! The USSR’s secret police, the OGPU, and its task of “destroying religion and combating anti-Communist elements,” was mentioned in that article as well, but without any marked disapproval (Rosōa t’ükchip 1931). If Tsarist Russia represented the worst of the past, then the “Russia of the workers and peasants,” though its transition to Socialism was still seen as incomplete, represented the best of the future, embodying the very spirit of progress Korea’s modern intelligentsia was captivated with from the 1880s onward.

This did not mean, of course, that the sad realities of 1920-30s Soviet Russia – still a poor society in the midst of major dislocations caused by accelerated industrialization – were not apparent to visitors from colonial Korea. A 1930 travelogue by a famed Seoul medic, Dr. O Kūngsōn (1877-1963), showed readers a rather disorderly and inhospitable society – the author had huge difficulties securing a room in the overcrowded Moscow hotels, was shocked by the complete absence of a service mentality on the part of the personnel and had his money stolen while travelling through Siberia. The sight of the huge queues for bread and other daily necessities was ubiquitous throughout Moscow, and the crowds of destitute peasants leaving their native places in hope of securing a better living in the industrializing cities reminded the Korean traveller of the impoverished Koreans going to Manchuria or Japan in a desperate struggle for existence – although Dr. O was seemingly unaware of the huge tragedy of forcible “collectivization” of the Soviet peasantry in 1929-30, and the real extent of the accompanying social dislocations. It was clear for the Korean medic that Russia was still a “backward” (*hujin*) society compared to the “advanced” (*sōnjin*) societies of Europe and North America. In addition, it was a society that oppressed the Russian Orthodox Church as well as other Christian confessions. That was hardly agreeable to Dr. O, a zealous Presbyterian and the first Korean to become a professor of the Protestant Severance Medical College. He could only pity the plight of Imperial Russia’s former middle classes, whose living standards visibly suffered because of the post-revolutionary redistribution of the socio-economic resources. However, despite all the poverty, disorder and “backwardness” he witnessed, Dr. O still admired many features of the new Soviet society – the visible absence of racial discrimination, for example, or the “unprecedented” development of women’s rights (the availability of abortion, was, however, much less agreeable to Dr. O). As for the tangible rigidity of the Soviet system (the “policy of spying on citizens,” as Dr. O put it), it was perfectly understandable for the

Korean guest – after all, the “counterrevolutionary efforts” were “unceasing,” and the Soviet government had no choice but to use repression in order to cling to power (O 1930).

To which degree the realities of the oppressive side of the “great revolutionary experiment” were known to and understood by the Korean intellectual public is a difficult question. It certainly did not remain unknown to the professional Russia watchers in the Japanese governmental apparatus and semi-governmental agencies. The Southern Manchurian Railway’s Research Bureau (*Mantetsu Chōsabu*), the semi-governmental “Mecca of Russian Studies” of 1910-1920s Japan (Coox 1990, 21), in the beginning of the 1920s commissioned its Harbin branch to conduct research on the conditions in Siberia. The resulting report was published in 1923 and sent to all governmental agencies interested in Russian affairs, including the Governor-General of Korea. This research, focused mainly on Siberia, gave a rather low estimation of the ordinary population’s loyalty to the new regime, attributing its visible passive acceptance of the Communist rule to a combination of post-civil war weariness and fear of OGPU repression. Repression was said to especially target the anti-governmental groups among university students and scholars as well as former activists of the anti-Bolshevik parties (Minami Manshū Tetsudō Harubin Jimushō chōsaka 1923, 1-10, 35-36). In Korean publications too, the prohibition against placing “idealist philosophical,” anti-Bolshevik or religious literature, as well as “cruel, vulgar and obscene” detective and erotic novels in Soviet public libraries was mentioned as early as 1926. However, the Korean author concluded that the Bolsheviks were hardly exceptional in this respect: “books contradicting the national policy are seen as dangerous and often prohibited in all countries,” Soviet Russia being no exception (Ilgija 1926). Against the backdrop of Japanese colonial oppression in Korea, typified by a thorough system of pre-publication censorship for all book manuscripts and periodicals (Chang 2009), the Soviet situation did not appear especially unusual or troubling.

In the 1930s, the tone of Korean publications dealing with the Soviet system of political control and repression remained more or less the same. A short explanatory article on OGPU in a popular journal, *Samch’ōlli*, in 1930, mentioned that OGPU possessed both its own military units and had the right to try and execute suspected “counterrevolutionaries,” but did not make much of it. As its anonymous author put it, “in all the countries of the world the political criminals or those who put their countries into danger are being dealt with in the strictest fashion.” So, the all-permeating spy network of the OGPU was an important condition for “overcoming the chaos of the past and

defending revolutionary Russia” (Anonymous 1930). A longer article on the OGPU published by the same journal in 1932 states that the “OGPU informers are so common in all strata of the Russian population that there is a fair likelihood of having one informer in a company of three people meeting together.” It also remarked that the foreign agents of the OGPU demonstrated a rather cavalier approach towards the sovereignty of foreign countries, kidnapping the Russian émigré monarchist military leader, General Kutepov (1882-1930), from Paris in 1930. However, the worst torture the OGPU was said to be using was sleep deprivation (Anonymous 1932) – a far cry from the plethora of extremely painful physical tortures used by the Japanese colonial police in Korea of that time (Pak 2006, 1-120). A longer memoir by a former OGPU detainee, a Vladivostok-based Korean émigré accused of “counter-revolutionary agitation,” imprisoned but then amnestied and deported to Korea (as a Japanese citizen) in 1930, mentioned strict, but polite treatment by the OGPU officers, as well as the presence of Russian Koreans among the OGPU investigators (Muhak Sanin 1935). In a word, the repressive side of the Soviet regime was not unknown, but was at the same time seen as a sort of necessary evil, hardly excessive by what was regarded by the mainstream Korean authors as the international standards of the day. The existence of the OGPU did not prevent the USSR from being seen as a “civilized” power by Korean intellectuals – on the contrary, it was seen as an indispensable, albeit not necessarily positive, part of the revolution’s “civilizing mission.”

To Korea’s anarchists, however, the repressiveness of the Soviet state mattered much more than to the moderate nationalist mainstream of colonial Korea’s intellectual society. The enormous hopes the anarchist movement worldwide had pinned upon Russia’s October Revolution turned into bitter disillusion, especially after the resolute suppression of the March 1921 Kronstadt Rebellion, many participants of which were themselves under the influence of anarchist ideas (see the anarchist criticism of the suppression in Berkman 1922). Since the Soviet state posed as the successor to the great popular uprising of 1917, its authoritarian nature was being perceived by anarchists with much deeper bitterness than the “fully expected” repressiveness of an ordinary “capitalist state.” Then, in Korea as elsewhere, the anarchists were often locked into a fierce struggle against Communists over control of the workers’, youth and other mass organizations. The internecine fights between the “proletarian revolutionaries” of different colors were sometimes fairly bloody. The “black vs. red” (anarchists vs. Communist) struggle over the leadership of the Wönsan Youth Association from 1923-1927, for example, left one person dead and several badly wounded before the association in question

dissolved itself on October 14, 1927, and then reorganized under a Communist banner (Pak 2005, 332). So, the Korean anarchists had good reasons to bitterly denounce the Moscow sponsors of their rivals. A journal of Shanghai-based émigré Korean anarchists, *T'arhwan* (Re-conquest), characterized in its inaugural issue (June 1, 1928) the “Marxist” Communism of the Soviet type as “signboard Communism,” “so-called Communism for governmental use” (*ch'ongbu öyong kongsanjuüi*) and “coercion-based Communism” (*kangkwön kongsanjuüi*) (cited in Pak 2005, 85). The Russian revolution, “hijacked by the Communists,” was seen as a failure, and the Soviet peasants, including the Maritime Province-based Korean peasant population, were referred to as victims of both state and market exploitation (Pak 2005, 95). An earlier publication by the Korean anarchist émigrés in Beijing, the weekly journal *Gaoli Qingnian* (*Korean Youth* – published in Chinese, inaugural issue published on March 27, 1926), pitied in its inaugural issue the Korean independence fighters. They were supposedly being cynically “used by the Russian Communist leaders” for their own purposes and ruthlessly sacrificed when no longer seen as useful (Pak 2005, 39-40). However, the anarchists, especially the obscure China-based exiles, were far from being a dominant influence in the colonial Korean intellectual world – which generally tended to see Soviet Russia’s state organization as more or less consistent with what was understood to be the global norms of the day.

3. Goals – “Predatory Wolves” or the “Friends of the Downtrodden?”

As pre-1917 Russia appeared to the Korean modernizing intellectuals to be a backward autocracy of a frightening size and power, its goals were, naturally enough, often perceived as sinister and utterly incompatible with Korea’s goal of self-preservation. Simply put, Russia was a quintessential “predatory power” – one of the worst (or simply *the* worst) predator populating the Darwinist jungles of the modern world. This view – first articulated for Korean policy-makers in 1880 by Huang Zunxian (1848-1905)⁴ – was largely shared by many reformists in the 1880s-1890s who were either pro-American or pro-

4. Then a Japan-based Qing diplomat, he is also known as a prominent poet. His famous treatise, *Strategy for Korea* (Ch. *Chaoxian celüe*; Kor. *Chosön ch'aengnyak*), partly influenced by the contemporaneous Pan-Asianist movement in Japan (on Huang’s connections with the Japanese Pan-Asianists, see Ng 1995), argued that Russia, the worst predator of Europe, was moving the focus of its expansionist interests from Central Asia to East Asia and that its inimical designs upon Korea could only be checked by a strengthened vassal relationship to the Qing Empire, combined with an alliance to Japan and friendship with the USA (Song 2000, 46-68, 209-222).

Japanese, and tended to receive their information on the outer world from Anglophone or Japanese sources. Yu Kilchun and his 1885 characterization of Russia as a “predatory wolf” (Hö 1987, 15) typify the ideas of this group.

Of course, it did not mean that the “wolf” should not be studied. As a matter of fact, Russia’s Peter the Great (1672-1725) was, on par with other paragons of “civilization and state power” (such as Bismarck or Washington), one of the heroes of Korea’s early nationalists. Satō Nobuyasu’s biography of Peter (Satō 1900) and other Japanese materials were used for compiling a Korean biography (or, rather, hagiography) of Peter (Kim 1908). It was full of moving descriptions of how the Russian emperor instituted military recruitment modeled on Prussia and built a fleet modeled on that of the Netherlands “not because of his admiration of foreign countries, but because he loved his own country enough to wish to lay the foundations of civilization, strength and wealth there” (Kim 1908, 47-49). A simplified version of this account, with fewer Chinese characters and more vernacular explanations, was serialized in *Sonyŏn* (issues 1-4, November 1908 – February 1909), a premier journal for adolescents. The first installment of the series was duly accompanied by a detailed explanation of Russia’s enormous size, multiethnic make-up, and long history of territorial enlargement (P’idük taeje II 1908, 51-56).

Min Yŏnghwan, his fear of “Russian aggression” notwithstanding, professed the deepest respect towards Peter’s achievements in the diary of his 1896 journey to Russia, *Haech’ŏn ch’ubŏm* (An autumn sail in the sky-like ocean) (“Russia, which was not previously civilized, became strong and wealthy”). He also praised the Russian emperor’s character, specifically mentioning the well-known stories of Peter’s apprenticeship at a Dutch dockyard and his travel to Britain “to learn about politics.” Then, above all, Peter – as Min viewed him – also demonstrated the very Confucian virtues of personal thrift, diligence and a full-hearted devotion to public affairs (Min 2007 [1896], 96-97, 108). But, while giving some hope that Korea might be able to achieve the same heights in “civilizing itself” as Petrine Russia, these publications also helped to solidify its image as a relentlessly expansionist power. After all, did not Peter – aside from his purported “patriotism and self-sacrificial character” – also distinguish himself by forcibly taking the Baltic provinces from Sweden, while his successors also managed to occupy another former Swedish possession, Finland? (Min 2007 [1896], 97) Such an image of the northern neighbor was, in turn, to justify the fears of Russia’s “relentless encroachment” first articulated by Huang Zunxian and strengthen the Pan-Asianist calls for cooperation with Japan and/or unifying all three main East Asian states (Japan, China, Korea) into a “Yellow coalition” able to fend off “the white predators.”

The fear of Russia – partly justified, given the activist expansionist policies of the Tsarist government in Northeastern China and Korea after the Triple Intervention (1895) and the coerced “lease” of Lüshun (Port-Arthur) in 1898, but often somewhat exaggerated – was fanned by Korea’s nascent modern press. Already the *Tongnip Sinmun* (The Independent), Korea’s first ever private newspaper written in the vernacular, editorialized on Russia’s “insidious plans” to conquer all the East Asian states after the completion of the Trans-Siberian Railway and the navy bases in Lüshun and Dalian (Dalny) (Editorial, February 27, 1899). Then, the Russophobic editorial line was continued by *Hwangšöng Sinmun*, a privately owned (but governmentally sponsored) paper printed in mixed Sino-Korean script and popular among the reform-oriented Confucian literati and officials. Its editorial writers were by 1899-1900 already quite sure that the construction of the railway throughout Siberia, as well as the Russian naval developments in Liaodong, gave substance to the threat of Korea ultimately becoming a Russian protectorate. This catastrophe had to be prevented by cooperation with Korea’s East Asian neighbors, China and Japan (Editorials, October 10 and 19, December 1 and 4, 1899; January 10 and 23, 1900).

Having caused some panic in court circles by alerting Korean society to Russia’s purported proposal to divide Korea amongst itself and Japan (August 8, 1900), the *Hwangšöng Sinmun* continued to actively debate the theme of the “Russian threat,” its efforts increasing markedly after the Russian occupation of the Korean town of Yongamp’o and its vicinity on Korea’s northern border in the summer of 1903 (Editorial, June 18, 1903). By the autumn of 1903, it was telling its readers that Russia’s occupation of Manchuria could lead to the “Russian conquest of the whole East up to the Japanese Islands” and that the future of the whole “Yellow race” was now at stake (Editorial, October 1, 1903). More concretely and perhaps realistically, Russia was thought to be aspiring to divide Korea “like Poland,” taking the northern part of the peninsula and leaving the rest to Japan (Editorial, February 12, 1904). Japan, therefore, had to be supported in its “righteous war to defend the Korean and Chinese territory from the Russian devises” (Editorial, February 20, 1904). While *Hwangšöng Sinmun* was right about Russia’s strategic interests in the northern part of Korea, it obviously underrated the danger of Japan’s ambitions, the vision of the “fellow Yellow race state” being the establishment of its protectorate over the whole of the peninsula. The “Russian threat” seemingly dwarfed all the other dangers of the era of “dog-eats-dog competition” in the Darwinian jungles of the “civilized world” (Hyön 2009, 40-41, 55, 73-75, 80-81).

A good example of the continuous appeal of such a view of Russia, even after the “White predators” had been defeated, was the treatise *On the Oriental Peace* (*Tongyang p’yŏnghwaron*) penned in 1909 by Itō Hirobumi’s (1841-1909) assassin, An Chunggŭn (1879-1910). In 1907-1909, An’s attempts to organize guerrilla war against the Japanese were largely based upon the support of the émigré Korean community in and around Vladivostok, where An himself had to move to. In his treatise, however, he described Russia as an enemy worse than Japan – since the Russians were seen as representing the “White threat” against the “Yellow people of East Asia.” Expressing joy at Japan’s successes during the Russo-Japanese War and reprimanding the Japanese for their failure to take Vladivostok and Harbin and thus to do away with the “White threat in the East” altogether, An was emphasizing the importance of Korean and Chinese cooperation toward Japan’s victories. Further, he asked why Japan should deprive Korea of its independence instead of making it a trustworthy ally. An’s “Oriental Peace” was a grand project of a “Yellow alliance” – primarily against “the country so aggressive and full of sins and evils that it was punished at last by God and by the people,” Russia (Sin 1995, 169-180).

While An was ideologically anti-Russian but politically – at least, after 1905 – anti-Japanese, the view of Russia as “the primary threat” was then inherited by some of the right-wing conservatives of the colonial period, who mostly tended to collaborate with the Japanese colonial authorities. Some of them, notably the famed Methodist leader Yun Ch’iho (1865-1945) and a prominent writer, Yi Kwangsu (1892-1950), developed the pre-colonial anti-Russian mood into a fierce anti-Sovietism in the 1920s-1930s. Yun Ch’iho’s pre-colonial views on Russia combined the appreciation of Russia’s “modernizing potential” (he once wrote in his English diary in August 1894 that he longed for Korea’s own Peter the Great: Yun 1971-1989, Vol. 3, 363) with long-standing racial sympathy towards the Japanese rivals of the Eurasian giant. He famously commented in September 1905 on Japan’s victories over Russia: “I am glad Japan has beaten Russia. The islanders have gloriously vindicated the honors of the Yellow race. (...) I love and honor Japan as a member of the Yellow race; but hate her as a Korean from whom she is taking away everything (...).” (Yun 1971-1989, Vol. 6, 143). After the October Revolution in 1917, however, Yun’s view of Russia’s Soviet successor state shifted to unambiguously negative, ideological hatred towards Bolshevism supplanting the older racial motives. Yun Ch’iho went as far as to welcome Mussolini’s success in “protecting Italy from Bolshevism” and wishing Hitler – whom he otherwise despised and hated – a victory over Soviet Russia (Yun 1971-1989,

Vol. 9, 197-198, Vol. 11, 396-397). Yi Kwangsu's pre-revolutionary views on Russia – where he spent several months in 1914 editing émigré Korean periodicals in the Maritime province and Siberia (Ch'oe 1996) – were more nuanced and complicated compared to Yun's. His aversion of Russia's colonialist expansionism (one of his first novels, 1910's *Young Victim* (*Örin hŭisaeng*), dealt with the Polish anti-Tsarist resistance; Yi 2004) coexisted with a fascination for Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910), both for literary and, to a certain degree, philosophical and ideological reasons (Yi 1935). After the October Revolution, however, Yi Kwangsu followed Yun Ch'ihö in becoming a staunch anti-Communist (Kim 2001, 104). For Yi Kwangsu, the main enemy was not even the Soviet Union itself, but Korea's own Communists, whom he accused of putting their allegiance to the Soviet Russians ahead of a patriotic allegiance to Korea – that is, of the proverbial “flunkeyism towards the great power,” supposedly so typical of Korea's Sinophilic Confucians of old. The best anti-Communist “medicine” he could think of was a more active engagement of “nationally-oriented” intellectuals with the “masses” on the ground (Yi 1932).

To which degree the accusations of a “blindly pro-Russian” orientation Yi Kwangsu directed at his political adversaries were justifiable, is a tricky question. It is clear that in the 1920s and 1930s, Communists in Korea (as elsewhere) strongly identified with the USSR as the “motherland of the world proletariat.” They were certainly as strongly allied to the Russians as the sections of Korea's bourgeois intelligentsia typified by Yi Kwangsu himself were allied to the Japanese masters of the Korean Peninsula at that point. However, they certainly were not the first political force in Korea to recognize Russia as Korea's potential protector or savior. Russia as “the predatory wolf” raised fear among Korea's statesmen – but in the Darwinian jungles of modernity the supposedly strongest predator could also be seen as the best potential protector. Emperor Kojong (r. 1864-1907) pinned great hopes on Russian help several times during his turbulent reign (notably, in 1885-86, 1896-97 and 1904-07) (Hyön 2002, 40-77; Pak 2004, 231-390) and a few Korean nationalists found sanctuary in Russia after their country was annexed by Japan in 1910 (Pak 1993, 201-250). After 1917, some of them (notably Yi Tonghŭi) reinvented themselves as Communists, and launched upon a course of struggle for Korea's liberation with Soviet assistance (Pan 1998, 211-384).

For many Communists, the Soviet Union was a utopia in the process of materialization. Criticizing it could amount to sacrilege, and at this point Yi Kwangsu's condemnation of Communists' “blind subservience to the foreigners” certainly was not too far-fetched. Yet, what Yi Kwangsu's sweeping condemnation of the “Communist flunkeyism (*sadaejui*)” disregarded was the

deeply nuanced nature of the views of the Soviet Union held by diverse participants in the colonial Communist movement. Outright criticism of the USSR as a whole might have amounted to “thought conversion” (*chŏnhyang*) and was typically out of the question as long as the given individual continued to be a part of the movement. Actually, many “thought conversion” statements of the 1930s included harsh criticisms against the USSR (Chŏn 2002, 345) – and in some cases, criticisms of the Comintern’s cynical use of Korean revolutionaries for the sake of the USSR’s foreign policy interests (see a “thought conversion” statement to this effect by a known Marxist economist, In Chŏngsik: In 1938, 58-59) sounded fully or partly justifiable. However, certain aspects of Soviet life were open to the critical gaze of “unconverted” Communists or their sympathizers as well. Typically, a well-known novel, *The Koreans* (*Kkoraē* – first published in the monthly *Sinyŏsŏng*, January-February 1934), by Paek Sinae (1908-1939), an activist of the 1920s female and youth Communist movement, narrates the story of a Korean peasant family detained by Soviet-Korean border guards upon an illegal border crossing and eventually deported from Vladivostok where they originally wished to search for the corpse of a family member who died there. The story, which dramatized the contradiction between the USSR’s proclaimed proletarian internationalism and the realities of the USSR as a nation-state with all the usual attributes of a normal state, including a strict border regime and deportations of illegal immigrants, is said to have been based upon Paek’s own bitter experience of an attempted illegal border crossing to Vladivostok in 1927. However, the experience of a contradiction between Soviet universalist ideals and the much more complicated realities of Soviet life did not seem to have changed the radical convictions of Paek Sinae or her brother Paek Kiho, a noted Communist activist who eventually chose North Korea after 1945 (Yi 2009b, 32-57, 457-493). The USSR was not necessarily perfect, but it was seen as showing the way toward the ultimate perfection of humanity.

The fascination with the USSR notwithstanding, it is also clear that Korea’s Communists were, in the end, consciously acting in what they considered Korea’s best interests, and were not merely acting as the Soviets’ unthinking proxies. Their “love affair” with the Soviets can be explained in the light of Lenin’s activist anti-imperialist policy – since the early 1920s Korea was seen as an important theatre of “worldwide anti-imperialist struggle,” and Lenin’s regime became the first (and only) foreign government to recognize the Shanghai Provisional Government of Korea in 1920, and offer it two million rubles in aid (Pan 1998, 243). After the re-establishment of diplomatic ties with Japan in 1925, open aid to the Korean independence movement was no longer

possible, but assistance was continuously given to the Korean Communists through the clandestine Comintern channels. Korea's underground Communist Party was constantly buoyed financially by Comintern subsidies (for 1926 only, it requested 363,800 yen), and many of its best cadres were Moscow-trained – between 1921 and 1933, 189 Koreans graduated from the Communist University of the Toilers of the East (KUTV) (Wada et al. 2007, 21-30). In this way, Korean Communists were using the USSR – also seen as the universal centre of the “world revolution” rather than as a nation-state – in the same way the USSR was doubtlessly using them. And, as the program of the underground Korean Communist Party, published in the seventh issue of the Shanghai-based Communist monthly *Pulkkot (Flames)* in September 1926 indicates, they saw their allegiance to the USSR primarily as part of their commitment to “world revolution.” The latter was seen as a necessary requirement for the fulfillment of their revolutionary goals in Korea – and in this way, attachment to the “first ever proletarian state besieged by its imperialist enemies” was completely reconcilable with the revolutionary anti-imperialist nationalism permeating the Communist program (Yi 1992).

The friendliness towards the USSR in 1920s-30s' Korea was, moreover, by no means limited only to the Communists or socialists in general. Some nationalists, both moderate and radical, were keen to balance a respect for Socialist ideals with moderate criticism of certain Soviet policies. Research by a media historian shows, for example, that until 1937, when, under Japanese pressure, the USSR and Communism in general started to be represented as an enemy, the editorials of the moderate nationalist daily *Tonga Ilbo* and the more radical *Chosŏn Ilbo* largely tended to sympathize with what they perceived as the USSR's anti-colonial stance. By contrast, fascist Germany and Italy were – rather realistically – seen as the chief instigators of a new, and catastrophic, world war (Kim 2008, 61-62, 93). So far as the internal policies of the “proletarian state” were concerned, it was not necessarily perceived as being able or willing to realize its declared socialist or communist aims at its present stage of development. Colonial Korea's moderate observers of the USSR did not overlook, for example, the existence and important functions of money in the Soviet economy – which indicated that it was still based on monetary, market exchange, despite state control over production and the presumed control of the cooperatives over distribution (Kim 1931). A moderate – definitely non-Communist and in many respects rather anti-Communist – Japanese author, Abe Toshiō, whose 1928 book, *Wakaki Roshia (Young Russia)* might have been known also to the educated Korean public, went even further and emphasized the “state capitalist” nature of the purported “state of workers and

peasants.” “State capitalism” meant state ownership of large-scale industry together with the ability of the state to administratively regulate the sea of small private businesses, including millions of peasant farms. Abe had justifiable doubts about the purported “socialist” nature of the state capitalist economy in “New Russia” – after all, why should the “socialist” state attempt to prohibit strikes at state-run enterprises? But, as Abe saw it, both revolution and Bolshevik dictatorship were unavoidable given the degree of Russian pre-revolutionary backwardness, and the Soviet Communists were, after a trial-and-error period immediately after the revolution, conducting an ultimately peaceful and cooperative policy, which could also allow Russia’s neighbors (including Japan) to benefit from exploiting Russia’s resources (Abe 1928, 3-7, 67-85, 97-110, 183-199, 293-313)

“Moderate friendliness” did not mean that Korea’s nationalists were uncritical towards the Soviets – the Sino-Soviet military conflict over the Eastern Manchurian Railway in the autumn of 1929, to take one example, was seen by *Tonga Ilbo* editorial writers as one more example of “Western aggression” against China, a position thoroughly criticized by Korean Communists (Kim 2008, 262-263). But, with the exception of certain right-wingers with close ties to the colonial administration, of the type represented by Yi Kwangsu or Yun Ch’iho, Korea’s colonial nationalists did not tend to be particularly prejudiced against the USSR either. They definitely saw the “Soviet experiment” as positively relevant for Korea too, both culturally and politically.

This attitude began to change only by the end of the 1930s. Japanese imperial propaganda from the mid-1930s postulated the USSR as a current rival and potential enemy. The November 25, 1936 Anti-Comintern Pact with fascist Germany identified the Soviet Union as the principal target of the “joint struggle” of both countries, and Soviet military aid to China’s *Guomindang* Nationalists was seriously unnerving the Japanese military (Slavinsky 2004, 16). This attitude could not but influence the moderate colonial nationalist media, which mostly represented the educated middle classes eager to promote specifically Korean ethnic interests but both unable and unwilling to question the colonial setup as a whole. For one example, the monthly *Samch’ölli*, originally moderately positive towards the Soviets, published in December 1936 a lengthy excerpt from a brochure printed by the Japanese Army Ministry (Rikugunshō), which described the economic development of the Soviet Far East as a potential “threat” to the Japanese Empire and presented Soviet control over the Mongolian military and its relations with both Communists and Nationalists in China as “preparations for aggression against Japan” (Anonymous 1936). A fragment from a translated novel by a Soviet writer, Petr

Pavlenko (1899-1951), dealing with a possible future war against Japan – with Korea becoming the war theatre from the beginning – was published in the same monthly in May 1937 (Pavlenko 1937a), concurrently with its publication in a Japanese translation by Tokyo-based Kaizōsha Publishers (Pavlenko 1937b). And after Japanese and Soviet forces clashed on the very Korean-Russian border, near Lake Khasan in July-August 1938, the *Samch’ōlli* predictions of a future war between “our army” and the Soviets in the “Soviet-controlled and Communized Mongolia” (Anonymous 1938a) or its praise of the Northern Hamgyōng residents’ “unwavering support for our troops” during the brief war against the Soviets (Yi 1938) sounded unabashedly apologetic. For the moderate nationalists formerly showing a relatively positive interest in Korea’s northern neighbor, the USSR was now “our Empire’s enemy” – or, at least, it was what they had to officially profess under the strict wartime censorship system.

But Japanese censorship was not necessarily the only reason for the bad publicity the USSR was getting in late 1930s colonial Korea’s mainstream media. Some of the Soviet policies of the late 1930s were frustrating from the colonial intellectuals’ viewpoint – the most notorious among them being the forced expulsion of the Maritime Province-based Soviet Koreans to Central Asia in 1937 (on the deportation of the Soviet Koreans, see Lee 2003). It was widely reported in the Korean press in late 1937 and 1938 (Yi 2007, 399), and *Samch’ōlli*, among others, published some in-depth reports on the problem. A report in the January 1938 issue of the monthly highlighted the brutality of the forced uprooting of the more than half-century old, two hundred thousand-strong resident Korean community of the Russian Far East – largely well-adjusted economically and socially, recognized as pioneers of wet rice agriculture in the Maritime Province, and known for its well-developed cultural and educational life, with all the Korean schools, theatres, libraries and clubs being now left behind and abandoned. The anonymous author (or authors) of the report spoke bitterly of the Soviet betrayal of the Korean “anti-Japanese groups” (émigré nationalist organizations) – utilized when they were needed, but subjected to executions, imprisonments and forced exiles from 1936 as “dangerous elements supposedly threatening the border zone security and potentially able to provoke a war with Japan.” Ironically – given the previous “anti-imperialist” reputation of the USSR – it was left now to the Japanese Government-General of Korea and the Japanese Foreign Ministry to lodge protests with the Soviet Government against the deportation of Koreans from the Far East – protests, which, as *Samch’ōlli* emphasized, were bluntly dismissed by the Soviet side, since almost all the Soviet Koreans were Soviet

citizens (Anonymous 1938b). Largely the same content, with some insignificant omissions and additions – for example, a mention of Koreans’ failure to adapt to the desert-like conditions in Central Asia, where neither fishing nor wet rice agriculture were possible, was added – was repeated, mostly almost *verbatim*, in another article in the March 1940 issue (Chonggakhagin 1940). A new image of Russia as a victimizer of its Korean minority was being created.

The exact scale of the damage done to the Soviet reputation in Korea by the deportation of and repressions against the Korean minority in the USSR, as well as other Stalinist atrocities of the late 1930s, is hard to gauge. As far as the “hard core” of Communist faithful was concerned, their faith was being severely tested, but in the end their doubts were habitually put aside. According to the protocols of the Japanese police, which investigated the arrested and indicted members of the underground Kyöngsöng K’omgürup (Seoul Communist Group, 1935-1941) – the centre of the wartime Communist resistance – such issues as the deportation of the Soviet Koreans, the Soviet-German non-aggression pact (August 1939), the Soviet-German division of Poland (September 1939), the Soviet occupation of the Baltic states (summer 1940) and the Winter War against Finland (November 30, 1939 – March 13, 1940) were all actively discussed by the Korean Communist leaders. Smaller buffer states in Eastern and Central Europe, like Poland, often compared to Korea, were in a good position to win the sympathy of the Korean anti-colonial leftists, but in most cases the debates on Soviet policies ended with the vindication of all Soviet actions. The pact with Germany was “needed to break the united front of the anti-Soviet imperialist states,” and in the Baltic States, Poland, and Finland, the USSR had “to chastise the local bourgeoisie, who have acted as agents of Anglo-American imperialism” (Yi 2002, 365-372). In a world where Communism was often synonymous with the most uncompromising currents of the anti-colonial struggle and Moscow was synonymous with Communism, loyalty to the USSR was hard to question without fully changing one’s ideological orientation.

Not only Communist stalwarts, but even more moderate, non-socialist nationalists often found it very hard to criticize the Soviets, partly because they lacked precise information on the scale of the repressions in the 1930s. For example, Yi T’aejun (1904-?), a prominent realist writer without known Communist connections in the colonial period, chose to live in the Soviet-occupied northern part of Korea in 1946, partly because of his long-held fascination with the “modernity and progress” the USSR was supposed to represent. Sent on a trip to the country of his modernist dreams in August 1946, Yi was diligently trying to look there for a well-known Communist

writer, Cho Myŏnghŭi (1894-1938), who sought political refuge in the USSR in 1928 – unaware of the death sentence Cho had received in 1938, as part of a purge of the Soviet Korean intellectuals (Yi 2007, 399). In his Soviet travelogue (*Ssoryŏn kihaeng*, 1947), Yi was trying hard to explain away the visible poverty of the majority of the Soviet citizens he met, as well as the inferior quality and sheer deficit of the consumer goods, through the strict requirements of an “egalitarian society” (where “all have to be poor equally but none is much poorer than others”) and the expenses needed to provide the “high standards of cultural life,” both for Russians and non-Russian minorities (Yi 2001b, 393-411).

It is not difficult to surmise that in cases of other non-Communist intellectuals choosing to move to the Soviet-controlled northern part of the divided Korean Peninsula too, the fascination with “Soviet progressiveness,” as well as the lack of full information about the seedy sides of the Stalinist model and the willingness to legitimize the visibly negative sides of Soviet life through lofty ideas and promises of a brighter future could also have played a role. While most of them had had direct experience of the evils of colonialism and capitalism, the indirect or strictly controlled interactions with the Stalinist state (like the well-choreographed Soviet visits by official delegations, from Korea and elsewhere) made it possible for them to create the sort of “progressive” image that fully suited their deeply cherished modernist dreams. The USSR claimed to represent a modernity essentially free from exploitation and inequality – a dream that retained its attractiveness for so many foreign observers even if they possessed some factual evidence to the contrary. And Koreans, deeply traumatized by life under a repressive colonial regime and genuinely aspiring for a “good,” “liberational” modernity, were hardly an exception.

Conclusions: A Closed Circuit of Idealization? The Image of the USSR in Colonial Korea and Beyond

By way of conclusion, it may be said that in modern Korea, the image of Russia and the Soviet Union tended to vacillate between two extremes. On the one hand, there was a strong tendency to see pre-revolutionary Russia as an immediate threat to Korea. This perception was sometimes tinted with “yellow” racism and articulated in terms of the fashionable Pan-Asianist rhetoric, but it was basically rooted in the view of Russia as militarily powerful and at the same time politically reactionary. Russia was the “out-group” viewed as very strong, occupying a high position in the international pecking

order and simultaneously embodying the ruthlessness of the international Darwinian jungles – a perfect candidate for a “threatening Other” in terms of the psychology of inter-group perceptions. Like the rest of the Western imperialist powers, it was simultaneously a “threat” and “model” – Peter the Great was seen in pre-colonial Korea as one of the main “heroes of civilization and enlightenment,” his reforms being a blueprint for Korea’s own transformation. However, in Russia’s case the balance between perceptions of it as a “threat” and “model” were visibly skewed towards the former stereotype, certainly when compared to the way the US or Britain were perceived, obviously due to Russia’s territorial proximity and active involvement in the imperialist politics around Korea, especially between 1895 and 1905.

Views of the Soviet Union were incomparably more favorable, due to a complex combination of political circumstances. Firstly, sympathy towards the Russian revolutionary movement was already palpable in Korean publications of the period 1905-1910, and the Bolsheviks were seen as the direct successors of their revolutionary predecessors. Secondly, even as the USSR was visibly becoming a great military power once again in the early 1930s, it was not perceived as threateningly as Tsarist Russia was. Some hardcore right-wingers (Yun Ch’iho, Yi Kwangsu etc.) being an exception, even most mainstream nationalists, not to speak of USSR-allied Communists, attached huge importance to the USSR’s perceived anti-colonial stance. Thirdly, the Bolsheviks’ social experiment, especially in the realm of greater gender equality or promotion of mass education, was seen as essential to the worldwide cause of progress, which from the 1880s onward was the main prism the modernizing Korean intellectuals tended to see the world through. The October 1917 Revolution magically transformed Russia from a backward and aggressive state into a champion of the anti-colonial and generally progressive causes in the eyes of many Korean observers. The negative sides of life in “Red Russia” did not go unnoticed either – the OGPU, the USSR’s secret police, got its share of attention in colonial Korean publications. By the end of the colonial period, Stalinist repression against the Russian Far East-based Korean minority population did serious damage to the reputation of the USSR among mainstream nationalist intellectuals of colonial Korea. But all the negative sides of the Soviet experience were largely subsumed under the generally positive overall framework of perception. Russia’s perceived “jump” from backwardness into the uncharted waters of socialist “civilization and progress” was definitely seen as highly significant for Korea’s own future.

One of the important historical consequences of the generally positive image of the USSR in the eyes of a large part of the non-Communist colonial

intelligentsia was that, after 1945, choosing to live in the Soviet-occupied northern part of Korea was surprisingly easy for many of the “best and brightest.” Of course, Soviet prestige was only one of many factors pushing vaguely “progressive” and “patriotic” intellectuals to the North – discontent with the American policies in the South, especially with the perceived failure to duly punish the erstwhile pro-Japanese collaborators, and with dire economic conditions were perhaps of paramount importance (Cho 2002) – but it was a background against which fateful and irreversible decisions were made. As far as writers are concerned, the most famous cases of non-Communists heading North – aside from Yi T’aejun’s case already mentioned above – include Hong Myŏnghŭi (1888-1968), a recognized historical writer and expert in classical Chinese learning, and Kim Saryang (1914-1950), known for writing highly acclaimed literary works in Japanese in the 1930s. While Hong had some connections with the fledgling Communist movement in the mid-1920s (whether he was ever a regular party member remains a subject of controversy) and Kim was known to have defected in 1945 to the Chinese Communist-controlled areas from the Japanese army into which he had been forcibly recruited, neither of the two literary luminaries were recognized as active Socialist radicals in the 1930s or 1940s. Both, however, were life-long fans of the Russian classical literature they mostly read in Japanese translations (Kim Saryang was, in addition, well-versed in Mikhail Sholokhov’s writings) – and Hong Myŏnghŭi in particular was deeply moved by the successes of North Korea’s fledgling planned economy, and, by extension, the modernizing potential of the Soviet economy planning model as such (Chŏng 2005, 105-115, 133-142; Kang 1999, 224-260, 520-556). As to the former participants in the 1920s-1930s Communist “proletarian arts movement” – typified by Yi Kiyŏng (1896-1984), who was to become one of the North Korean literary leaders after 1945 – it was usual for them to recollect in private conversation that from the view of colonial Korea of the 1920s-1930s, the USSR looked to them as “the country of our dreams, where there are no rich and poor, and where more than one hundred nationalities harmoniously live in friendship” (Chŏng 2005, 118-124). The choice in favor of the Soviet-influenced North Korean version of modernity made by a large group of prominent Korean intellectuals in the late 1940s ended in personal tragedies for some (Yi T’aejun, for example, was purged from Pyongyang in 1957 after having been accused of “counterrevolution,” and ended his days as a provincial miner: Chŏng 2005, 133), but at the same time did provide Kim Il Sung’s regime with a respectable facade, great national writers like Hong Myŏnghŭi endowing it with legitimacy as “the rightful heir” to the national cultural tradition.

While Soviet influences, especially in the ideological and cultural sphere, remained significant in North Korea even after Kim Il Sung's regime achieved a higher degree of independence from its Soviet patrons in the mid-1950s (on the Stalinist basis of Kim Il Sung's *chuch'e* ideology, for example, see David-West 2007), South Korea remained almost fully detached from the USSR by the Cold War politics until the late 1980s. Some relaxation – in the form of occasional and carefully controlled mutual visits, mostly in connection with international sport or cultural events, and rather insignificant indirect trade – took place from the mid-1970s (Tkachenko 2000, 57), but still, by and large, the USSR and South Korea remained two worlds apart until the epochal changes in the end of the 1980s. It meant that the Soviet Koreans, whose deportation in 1937 cost the USSR a lot of good will on the part of the Korean intelligentsia, became almost completely forgotten until the 1980s Soviet *perestroika* (liberal reforms) made them accessible to South Korean researchers. Even as late as 1985, occasional South Korean scholarly publications on the USSR's Korea policy and Soviet Koreans typically included only very basic data on the population figures and main areas of residence (Kim 1985). This detachment, physical and informational, from the Soviet realities, allowed a sizable number of South Korea's home-grown Socialists in the 1980s to adopt a very idealized view of the USSR. It was typically regarded as a bona fide socialist country and as such a possible model for South Korea's own future progressive transformation, the undemocratic nature of its bureaucratic command economy and many repressive features of its social life being either ignored or glossed over. As a result, the implosion of the East European “real socialism” dealt a significant blow to South Korea's progressive movement, largely destroying the overall credibility of its orthodox theoretical discourses. The lessons of the colonial period, when excessive trust in the USSR's “socialist” self-representation blinded a whole generation of Korean intellectuals to the more destructive sides of Stalinist policies, were not duly learned, to the huge detriment of South Korea's progressive movement (Kim 2000b, 265-271).

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