

## Introduction to “Writing Revolution Across Northeast Asia”

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The 1917 October Revolution in relatively “backward” Russia was supposed to spark other revolutions across the industrial West. Already by 1920, however, after several failed European uprisings, the Bolsheviks began pinning their hopes on Asia. In September 1920 the Third Communist International (Comintern) convened the First Congress of the Peoples of the East in Baku, where Comintern head Grigory Zinoviev declared “holy war” against Western imperialism (Riddell 1993, 78). The following year, as Katerina Clark notes in her contribution to this special issue, the First Congress of the Toilers of the Far East met in Irkutsk to promote international unity against both class and colonial oppression. In this vision, the Soviet Union, itself stretching to the Pacific, would be the center of a new, liberated world that would champion national independence alongside the interests of workers and peasants.

Foundational, often Cold War-era studies of this topic tend to emphasize the shortcomings of Soviet engagement with the region, namely, the mismatch between top-down directives and local contexts. Perhaps most famously, in the 1920s the Comintern insisted that China had to pass through bourgeois nationalism before advancing to socialism, resulting in the Chinese Communist Party’s alliance with the Guomindang and subsequent near-destruction in 1927. Although the Bolsheviks had justified revolution in largely agrarian Russia, they applied a less flexible view to Asia, asserting that even imperial Japan, with its robust industrial economy, was not yet primed for socialism (Linkhoveva 2017). Since the 1990s, however, a growing body of scholarship across multiple fields has provided a more nuanced view of the interwar Soviet-oriented Left. While often acknowledging the failings of top-down decrees, these revisionist studies have emphasized both how local agents adapted and reworked policies on the ground, as well as how the Soviet Union and Comintern themselves were no insular monoliths. For example, researchers have argued that the 1920 Baku Congress and Lenin’s distinction that same year between “oppressed nations” and “oppressor nations” laid the groundwork for postwar postcolonialism (Young 2001), and have described Moscow’s policies toward its own minorities as a kind of affirmative action (Martin 2001). Within American studies, the Soviet Union’s inspirational role for African American radicalism and culture has launched its own dynamic body of

scholarship (Kelley 1990; Baldwin 2002). Meanwhile, scholars have countered or coupled the traditional vertical, center-periphery view of the interwar Left with a variety of horizontal and multicentric models (Manjapra 2010; Glaser and Lee forthcoming). For example, in Asian studies, it has long been recognized that Moscow was just one of many centers for the region's interwar Left: Shanghai served too as a headquarters for not just Chinese but also Japanese and Korean Communists whereas Marxist and Soviet texts often first entered the region through Japan and the Japanese language (Bowen-Struyk 2006; Perry 2014). Japan thus figured as the region's imperial menace but also mediator of leftist internationalism.<sup>1</sup>

This special issue of *Cross-Currents* builds on such scholarship by revisiting Russian and Soviet visions of revolution and their fraught, indelible imprint on China, Japan, and Korea. The Soviet Union of the interwar years was distinct from European powers in its mobilization against Western empire and capitalism. Indeed, Russia itself had long been regarded in the West as semi-Asiatic, whereas its stunning defeat in the Russo-Japanese War had blurred long-standing racial and cultural hierarchies. Soviet-Asian encounters might therefore best be understood as intra-Asian—Russia as an “Oriental occident” that, after 1917, beckoned progressive Asians with calls for socialist internationalism and national self-determination (Tikhonov 2016, 7–80).<sup>2</sup> These encounters contributed to the establishment of communist regimes in China and North Korea but also reveal internationalist paths not taken: ways of thinking across national boundaries even while pursuing national struggles against empire.<sup>3</sup>

Four of the five articles collected here explore these questions through a focus on literary circulation—literature as a medium for tracing the entangled languages, ambitions, and sentiments at hand. As Heekyoung Cho indicates in her article, if notions of world literature tend to foreground Western Europe in an implicit hierarchy of nations, a focus on the “(semi)peripheries of Russia and East Asia” points instead to a model of literary “comradeship” rather than competition—that is, Russian and East Asian literatures together articulating an “alternative to Western modernity” and “shared desires for social justice.” Cho’s work builds on a growing body of research that, freed from Cold War constraints, has reconsidered concepts like transnationalism, cosmopolitanism, and world literature vis-à-vis a long-defunct socialist internationalism. Most notably, Katerina Clark’s *Moscow, the Fourth Rome* shows how, even amid Stalinist oppression and autarky in the 1930s, the Soviet capital remained “a center for a

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<sup>1</sup>Samuel Perry (2014, 142–143) addresses how Korean communists were frequently relegated by their Japanese comrades, though he concludes that such contradictions reflected the difficult process of translating class struggle into antiracism and anticolonialism. Tatiana Linkhoveva (2017) shows how Japanese communists themselves were instructed by the Comintern to give priority to revolution in China—i.e., view China rather than Japan as the region’s revolutionary center.

<sup>2</sup>Examining East Asia vis-à-vis Russia and the Soviet Union thus departs from scholarship on imperial encounters that foreground “the West and the Rest” (Thornber 2009, 3).

<sup>3</sup>As Anna Belogurova (2017) puts it, left-wing internationalism across East Asia was readily “rebranded” to serve national interests, and vice versa.

transnational intellectual milieu” in which “cosmopolitan patriots” traveled the world to advance both national interests and world revolution (Clark 2011, 25).<sup>4</sup> Accordingly, in her contribution to this special issue, Clark follows two such travelers, Boris Pilniak and Sergei Tretiakov, to China and Japan, where they departed from Soviet hegemonic literary models and tried to write in a way that countered Western exoticism, albeit with mixed results. As both Clark and Cho indicate, Russian/Soviet and East Asian literary encounters were hindered by mutual misrecognition and mistranslation; in Clark’s words, “Russian internationalists and their East Asian would-be confrères had little common language.” And yet Cho suggests that there was a virtue to these gaps between Russian and Asian literatures and languages, because they might have solidified international camaraderie by allowing East Asian writers to project “an image of the literature they *desired* onto that of Russian literature, (re)constructing it to fit their purpose in the process.” That is, the fact that the Soviet Union was so near and yet remained so far made it possible, for example, to (mis)read Leo Tolstoy and Fyodor Dostoyevsky as socialists and to arrive at expansive understandings of “proletariat” and “proletarian literature.” Distance, it seems, could bolster rather than hinder affinity.

Whereas the articles by Cho and Clark highlight transnational networks and travel, Jeehyun Choi’s article focuses on the state of Manchukuo as a paradoxical space comprising Chinese landlords, Japanese occupiers, and Korean settlers, and lying at the periphery of both the Soviet Union and Japan. Thus evading “any simple binary of (semi-)periphery and center in its politico-economic history,” Manchukuo—as depicted in Korean-Manchurian writer Kang Kyŏngae’s 1934 novella *Salt (Sogŭm)*—provides a concentrated case study of the varied peoples, ideologies, and literary forms captured in this special issue as a whole. As Choi shows, the novella’s long-suffering protagonist registers the “irrationality of Manchukuo’s constitution” through a combination of derangement and lucidity, as well as a refusal of ready-made political solutions. Instead, Choi describes the text as an instance of “peripheral realism,” as defined by Jed Esty and Colleen Lye (2012); the protagonist’s “fragmented but active powers of reflection”—borne of a combination of gender, colonial, and class oppression—point to a “broader, worldly literary aspiration to narrate the development of the capitalist system.”<sup>5</sup>

If the special issue’s first three articles use particular instances of literary circulation to point to new mappings of world literature, the two others reveal how such circulation enabled and continues to enable new understandings of nationhood. Although the Korean concept of *minjok* (ethno-nation) has long been connected to the Japanese concept of *minzoku*,<sup>6</sup> Vladimir Tikhonov’s article connects it to Marxist and

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<sup>4</sup>For related efforts to rethink world literature and culture via socialist internationalism, see Denning (2004), Djagalov (2011), Glaser and Lee (forthcoming), and Volland (2017).

<sup>5</sup>Choi here builds on Sunyoung Park (2015), a groundbreaking study of Korean leftist letters that presents Kang’s writings as engaging both feminist and socialist literatures.

<sup>6</sup>Naoki Sakai offers a comparative approach to *minzoku*—“an equivocal term encompassing race, ethnos, nation, and citizenry” (2009, 185) and articulated by Japanese thinkers inspired more by British and American anthropology than by Nazi ethnology.

Soviet approaches to nationality. Josef Stalin famously defined the nation as a stable, historically constituted community of people with a common (1) language, (2) territory, (3) economic life, and (4) “psychical disposition [*psikhicheskii sklad*], manifested in a community of culture”—a definition that appealed to non-Western and minority peoples around the world by allowing for both socialist unity and cultural diversity.<sup>7</sup> Noting how this definition was reproduced verbatim in Korea, Tikhonov demonstrates how such Marxist theories led Korean intellectuals to see *minjok* as resulting from historical and cultural processes rather than fixed primordial roots—*minjok* as “just one example of the universal process of nation formation,” according to which oppressed nations would eventually overcome the imperialist domination of oppressor nations as part of a wider struggle for socialist revolution.

Similarly, Sunyoung Park notes how the Korean concept of *minjung* (people)—typically associated with the radical nationalist democratization movement of 1980s South Korea—ascended during the 1920s in dialogue with Russian anarchism. Through a discussion of New Tendency literature and culture of the 1920s and peasant literature of the 1930s, Park reveals the broad influence of Russian anarchist thinker Piotr Kropotkin’s calls for popular revolt and mutual aid. As a result, anarchism became “the first transnational socialist culture that enabled Koreans to imagine an alternative modernity to that of imperialist capitalism.”

In sum, whereas the first three articles provide us with an expanded understanding of what Karen Laura Thornber calls (with an emphasis on Japan) “intra-East Asian literary contact nebulae” (2009, 2), the final two provide us with ideological payoffs—namely, a sense of how international socialism and anarchism informed national self-articulation in the region. However, this process did not entail sacrificing the national for the international, or local context for some Russian or Soviet center. As both Tikhonov and Park make clear, writers and scholars trying to spread socialist or anarchist ideas (as previously mentioned, often mediated via Japan and Japanese) had to work with what was already on the ground, for example, existing narratives surrounding national character and origins, as well as the much earlier spread of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism across the region.<sup>8</sup> The result was an ecumenical, open-ended leftism—attendant to peasant societies and, as Park emphasizes, a wide range of writers and aesthetic styles.

Tikhonov and Park also helpfully connect the interwar years to the present. Tikhonov expresses hope that a left-wing internationalist genealogy of *minjok* might

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<sup>7</sup>That is, based on the first three points, different nationalities could develop into a single Soviet *narod* (people) but all the while maintain that “psychical disposition,” which according to Stalin “exists at every given moment, it leaves its impress on the physiognomy of the nation” (1934, 8). For examples of the widespread appeal of Soviet nationalities policy, see Wright (1944) and Lee (2015).

<sup>8</sup>Accordingly, Tikhonov elsewhere (2016, 21) notes how, in the late 1920s, at least one faction of Korean communists pressed for a coalition with the Ch’ondogyo (Teaching of the Heavenly Way) religious group, which was influential among peasants.

bolster the emergence of civic nationalism (as opposed to ethno-nationalism) in contemporary South Korea—a nationalism geared toward large-scale emancipatory visions. Park finds in early twentieth-century anarchism a precursor to not only the 1980s *minjung* movement but also the current cooperative and autonomous rural community movements in South Korea. That is, the anarchist movement still gestures to an alternative modernity, but an alternative now to neoliberal rather than imperialist capitalism.

Taken as a whole, this special issue unearths a latent, variegated internationalism behind established authors and concepts—not to drape the interwar years with nostalgia or regret, but to articulate long-lost spatial and historical constellations geared toward reimagining the present.

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### **About the Author**

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