

CROSS-CURRENTS



EAST ASIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE REVIEW

Nakanishi Inosuke and Chungŏ Ijijo: Realism and Authenticity in Early Proletarian Literature

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Abstract

This article discusses the reception in Japan and Korea of the works of Nakanishi Inosuke, a leftist writer in the 1920s whose experiences in Korea formed the basis for much of his work. Two novels in particular, *Sprouts from Red Earth* and *Behind You*, were widely praised for their realistic representation of life on the peninsula, especially their depiction of Japanese imperialist activities and the anti-colonial pushback from Koreans. How exactly these novels were to be interpreted varied according to audience, however, giving rise to competing images of Nakanishi. Some critics considered him to be an advocate of a newly emerging international proletarian consciousness while other readers, including many Koreans, looked on Nakanishi (whom they called Chungŏ Ijijo, the Korean reading of his name) as a supporter of colonial nationalism. Still others contested his claim to authenticity altogether. In tracing the development of these interpretations of Nakanishi from these early works up until his participation in the founding of the Korean Artist Proletarian Federation (KAPF) in August 1925 and after, the article argues that his works' ability to successfully navigate the period of a dawning proletarian cultural movement through to its collapse lay (and continues to lie) in their ambiguity, an ambiguity that has facilitated a continual reinterpretation of him from the 1920s to the present day.

Keywords: Nakanishi Inosuke, Japan, Korea, proletarian literature, KAPF

On August 16, 1925, the leftist Japanese writer Nakanishi Inosuke (1887–1958) took the podium at the Konghoedang building in Seoul to deliver a lecture to a colonial audience on the virtues of a universal humanity. The speech was predictably short-lived. As Nakanishi's voice reached a crescendo over the packed hall, a Japanese man, his body tattooed with snakes, jumped up and began yelling for him to get off the podium. In the face of Nakanishi's refusal, the man pulled a knife and ran toward the stage while his companions began fighting with the mostly Korean crowd of several hundred, who had rushed to Nakanishi's aid. The hall was plunged into chaos, and Nakanishi managed to escape with the help of his hosts. For the next several days, the

incident and its aftermath were front-page news in the peninsular papers (Kwŏn 1991, 108). The speech had been one of several scheduled, but following the disturbance the conference was canceled, and so on the following day Nakanishi and several of his Korean hosts retired to a dinner, where in lieu of a farewell address they laid the groundwork for the formation of a group to be called the Korean Artist Proletarian Federation (Chosŏn P'ŭrollet'aria Yesulga Tongmaeng, or KAPF). This association, launched in a tiny restaurant by a handful of writers, would in a few short years come to play a dominant role in cultural production on the Korean peninsula.¹

Nakanishi's presence at the founding meeting of the KAPF marked a watershed in his career. He had written much on the peninsula by the time of his visit, including several full-length fictional works and numerous short stories and essays. Due to his time spent living there, Nakanishi was considered something of an expert on Korea, and his works had been widely praised for their realism and authenticity, particularly in their representation of life in the colony. This realism allowed his works to serve any number of ends, and critics were to equate it with everything from a manifestation of local color, to an endorsement of Korean nationalism, to an emerging proletarian consciousness. Nor were these the only viewpoints, for others challenged the veracity of Nakanishi's representative realism altogether. Indeed, the sheer variety of interpretations his works gave rise to indicates the trouble critics had in fitting Nakanishi into any preexisting genre. Even when they were able to, critical interpretation of his work did not always proceed in tandem throughout the empire, leading to situations in which the name Nakanishi Inosuke (or Chungsŏ Ijijo, the Korean reading of his name) signified different things to different readers.

Much of the difficulty of critical engagement with Nakanishi lay in the fact that his early works were written during a transitional moment in the cultural history of the Japanese empire. At the outset of his career, Nakanishi was relegated to the fringes of the literary establishment, as his critics, bereft of the analytical tools later offered by proletarian literature, were forced to use available terminology when looking at his works. Whereas some of those terms hailed from much older discourses, other terms, which would be in use throughout the colonial period, were only beginning to appear. With the emergence of an international proletarian consciousness by 1925 in both Japan and Korea, the stage was set to consolidate critical interpretation of Nakanishi on both sides of the colonial divide, which would facilitate his role in the formation of the first proletarian cultural organizations—in Korea, with the KAPF, and then in Japan, with the

Japan Proletarian Literary Arts League (Nihon Proletaria Bungei Renmei, or JPLAL). It was only with the appearance of these groups that the understanding of his works was fused and brought into conformity with proletarian literary ideology. This branding of Nakanishi as an author of proletarian literature would last until the end of that genre in the mid-1930s.

This article traces the arc of Nakanishi's reception in metropole and colony, from the release of his earliest works to his participation in the founding of the KAPF in 1925. In discussing how his realism came to be equated with authenticity, two specific works will be examined: 1922's *Sprouts from Red Earth* (Akatsuchi ni megumu mono) and its 1923 sequel, *Behind You* (Nanjira no haigo yori). Both were based in Korea and were considered authentic, realistic accounts of the situation on the peninsula; as such, they contributed much to Nakanishi's reputation among Koreans and Japanese. Examining further his visit to Seoul in August 1925, I explore how Nakanishi's works were able to navigate and take advantage of the rise of proletarian subjectivity throughout the empire and to leverage his reputation as a of authenticity into a prominent role in establishing the first organizations dedicated to the production of proletarian culture.

Nakanishi Inosuke and Korea

Nakanishi was widely praised for his knowledge of Korea, and his personal history with the peninsula dated from his childhood. He was born in Japan on February 8, 1887, near the present-day city of Uji, the illegitimate son of a peasant farmer. With the expansion of the railways, the land on which his house stood was repossessed, driving his family into bankruptcy. He left home at age sixteen, eventually finding work in a naval repair shop on the island of Tsushima, where he worked during the Russo-Japanese War. In February 1905 he left for Tokyo and attempted to enter the naval academy, but due to his status as an illegitimate child he was refused. He went instead into the army, joining an engineer battalion and being twice confined to the brig for insubordination. His nationalist fervor at this point cooled, giving way to an interest in socialism, cemented by his attendance at the first meeting of the Japan Socialist Party (Nihon shakaitō) in 1906 (Kobayashi 1985, 500).

After working a series of odd jobs in Tokyo, in 1911 Nakanishi went to Korea to search for his mother, who had moved there earlier. He found her in Pyongyang, now remarried and involved in the drug trade, and his stay with her was brief. Out on his own, he began work at the

Heijō Daily Newspaper (*Heijō nichinichi shinbun*), where his muckraking exposés on the Fujitagumi Company's treatment of local workers, as well as his harsh criticism of Governor-General Terauchi Masatake, soon landed him in jail. After four months he was expelled from the peninsula. After a brief period working for the South Manchurian Railway Company and some time spent in a geisha house in northern China, he returned to Japan. His interest in the organized labor movement continued upon his return, and in 1919 he helped set up the Japan Transport Workers Association (*Nihon Kōtsū Rōdō Kumiai*), leading several of its strikes in the early 1920s. As with his behavior in the military, here also his efforts earned him several stints in jail (I 2010, 112). He nevertheless continued with these activities for the next few years, though contemporary opinion of his abilities as a labor leader appears to have been rather low.

Sprouts from Red Earth

In February 1922, Nakanishi published his first full-length work, *Sprouts from Red Earth*, which he based on his experiences in Korea. A sprawling work of some 800 pages, the story is a juxtaposition of two narratives—one centered on a Korean farmer, Kim Ki-ho, and the other on a Japanese reporter, Makishima Kyūkichi. At the beginning of the work, Kim's land is forcibly expropriated by the newly installed Government-General of Korea, which wants to build a railroad through the area. Although Kim initially refuses to sell his land, in the end he is forced to part with it for a miniscule amount of money, and the area is turned over to a Japanese coal mining company. From here, Kim's luck only gets worse. His wife dies, and his son is thrown in jail by the military police. He then attempts to court the widow of a friend who is working at a hostess bar catering to Japanese immigrant miners. He shows up intending to buy her for the night with the money he received for his land, but he is instead beaten and robbed by the Japanese proprietor. A short time later, he accosts the widow as she is on her way home and ends up killing both her and her child with a brass chamber pot.

At this point, the narrative shifts to Makishima, who serves as a stand-in for Nakanishi. His history for the most part conforms to Nakanishi's own, as his search for his mother takes him from Tokyo to Pyongyang, where he finds her remarried and selling drugs. He also takes a job as a journalist, whereupon he receives an anonymous letter detailing horrific conditions at a new mine. He heads down to investigate, and there receives details on how the mining company has been brutally exploiting its workers. Makishima returns to Pyongyang and publishes the results

of his investigation, prompting a swift reaction on the part of the mining company, as police seize the newspaper's publishing machines and typesets, and Makishima is charged with libel and thrown in prison. The two narratives intersect when Makishima, stuffed into a small cell with thirteen other inmates at the height of the sweltering summer, meets Kim Ki-ho, who is awaiting execution for his crimes. Makishima is eventually released on bail, but at his sentencing he is given four months of penal servitude and returns to the prison at the end of that year, where he sees Kim one last time as the latter is preparing to ascend the scaffold.

The release of *Sprouts from Red Earth* marked an auspicious beginning to Nakanishi's career as a writer, as the book was generally well received (Shea 1964, 100). Surprising to many of his critics, though, was Nakanishi's sudden reappearance as a creative writer. Most of them, if they had not forgotten about him completely, had at least come to associate his name with the inside of a prison cell. While this notoriety assured at least a general curiosity about the work, guaranteeing it a certain amount of attention, it also meant that his critics were not going in blind; in fact, many of them found it difficult to disregard their previous opinions of him in the interest of a fair reading. This fact is an important one to note, as the original reception of the book would be frequently forgotten in later histories of proletarian literature.

One of the most ardent of Nakanishi's critics had been the novelist and activist Eguchi Kan (1887–1975), a former student of Natsume Sōseki at Tokyo Imperial University. In reviewing Nakanishi's output at the end of 1922, Eguchi commented that he had earlier received a copy of *Sprouts from Red Earth* from Nakanishi that, after a surprised reaction at the latter's new turn as a writer, he had promptly ignored. He returned to the work later, however, and after reading it he claimed it to be by far Nakanishi's best effort, and among the best of 1922's leftist literature. He praised the book for its realism, especially its balanced treatment of the class struggle among Japanese living in Korea and the ethnic struggle of Koreans against the Japanese (Eguchi 1922c). He also highlighted what he called the novel's sincerity (*shinseritī*). He praised this sincerity, inherent in the realistic representation of the subject matter, as the novel's most important element. This was not entirely unproblematic, though, for Eguchi ventured that the sincerity in reportage was at times more a display of Nakanishi's knowledge of Korean customs and manners than an expression of concern with the subjects themselves. Finding the excessive descriptions of these customs tedious and long-winded, Eguchi declared that Nakanishi's insistence on saturating the novel with them indicated either an overall lack of representative

objectivity or a partiality for cheap sentimentalism (Eguchi 1922a).

Also undermining any claims to objectivity, according to Eguchi, was the novel's excess of passion (*netsu*). This passion, later held up by several of Nakanishi's Korean critics as a defining element in his writing, was found by Eguchi to work against the novel's interests. Taking up several lachrymose passages detailing the suffering of Japanese prostitutes in Korea, Eguchi argued that such representation of colonial misery, while admittedly realistic and sincere, merely made the reader uncomfortable. He insisted that, had Nakanishi concentrated on an objective representation of the prostitutes' daily life, he might have been more successful in making his point (Eguchi 1922b). While this lapse was not enough to make one doubt the veracity of the work (groaning under the weight of the sincerity and passion its basic tenets still held), it did bring into question the palatability of that veracity for a metropolitan readership. The lengthy descriptions of Korean customs were too bizarre and foreign, and the unflinching look at the hardships suffered by resident Japanese too sentimental. Admirable though it may have been, Nakanishi's brand of objectivity was not an appealing one.

Eguchi's assessment of *Sprouts from Red Earth* is best summed up in his classification of the work as left-wing literature (*sakei bungaku*). This term was far from a neutral one, and the genre was viewed in 1922 as a derivative of the older category known as tendency literature (*keikō bungaku*). Although tendency literature had come to encompass anything from Confucian didacticism to Meiji-era political novels, the designation chiefly served to stress a work's supposed edifying function as opposed to any literary value. And indeed, for Eguchi, the true value of *Sprouts from Red Earth* lay in its exposure (appealing or not) of colonial reality. The label left-wing literature was therefore fitting, but it represented a cautious acceptance of Nakanishi as a writer, for it had the distinction of being an ambiguous and peripheral category, positioned far outside of the mainstream Japanese literary establishment (*bundan*).

Eguchi's acceptance of the novel's claim to representative authenticity, while widely shared, was not universal. One of the most vociferous opponents of the claim (as well as of Nakanishi in general) was Ōsugi Sakae (1885–1923), at the time Japan's leading anarchist theorist and an outspoken critic of Nakanishi's prior union activities. Putting his personal distaste for Nakanishi aside, however, Ōsugi commented in October 1922 that not only had he read *Sprouts from Red Earth* (Nakanishi had sent him a copy), but he had been very impressed by it. Although not won over by the form, which he labeled old-fashioned and clumsy, he confessed to

being drawn in by the work's content, saying that its use of Korea as a backdrop and central problematic forced him to think seriously about issues facing the colony. This in turn further aroused his curiosity and compelled him to continue reading. Ōsugi found it remarkable that Nakanishi, who had been in Korea as a metropolitan subject, could understand so well the sentiments of Koreans (Ōsugi [1922] 1963, 633–634).

Ōsugi's newfound respect for Nakanishi was short-lived, though, and ended with the appearance in the narrative of the character of Makishima. For Ōsugi, the creation by Nakanishi of a heroic alter ego was an unforgivable fabrication, and one that ultimately doomed the novel. Ōsugi noticed that Nakanishi's descriptive prowess, when applied to the Koreans (in some of the same passages loathed by Eguchi), left one deeply impressed, being obviously the product of a long period of time spent in Korea. When it came to Makishima, though, the narrative suddenly seemed to fly effortlessly, and for Ōsugi the reason was obvious: the portions of the work dealing with Makishima constituted a breakdown of the novel's realism, as it segued into Nakanishi's idealistic treatment of himself. His patience exhausted, Ōsugi confessed to skipping over the portions of the work that dealt with Makishima, though he did indicate their possible utility as a palliative for insomnia (Ōsugi [1922] 1963, 634).

Ōsugi's critique of Makishima focused on an aspect of the novel (if not an entire half) that was ignored by critics enamored with its realism, then fast being established as Nakanishi's trademark. While Eguchi had praised the novel's treatment of class and ethnic conflict, applauding Nakanishi for his incisive disclosure of colonial reality, Ōsugi was perceptive enough to notice that a sizable portion of the novel dedicated to presenting that reality was fabricated, and he chastised Nakanishi for taking this route in order to present a glamorous portrait of Makishima and, by extension, himself. In doing so, Ōsugi highlighted what would become one of the paradoxes of Nakanishi's writing in general: the realism that critics were equating with authenticity was, in many cases, based on falsification. Lulled into a sense of trust by Nakanishi's familiarity with the peninsula, they lined up to declare literary realism the most valuable asset of his works, showering him with accolades that in the future would embolden him to take yet more creative liberties. These liberties would have real-world ramifications in his next novel, *Behind You*.

Behind You

In March 1923, Nakanishi published *Behind You*, the follow-up to *Sprouts from Red Earth*. The story is also set in Korea, with most of it taking place in the northern border city of Sinūiju. Unlike the two narratives of *Sprouts from Red Earth* that intersect at the end, *Behind You* concerns itself almost entirely with the Korean point of view. The novel opens with the murder of a Japanese border guard in the region north of Sinūiju around the end of December 1917. Three local Koreans, having been found with a gun, are imprisoned and charged with the murder, although some local police have their doubts about the culpability of the three, as a note left by the killer (the contents of which are censored in both Japanese and Korean versions of the novel) bespeaks an education none of them seem to have. As it happens, the murder coincides with the arrival in the region of three other Koreans, led by the female Kwōn Chu-yōng, who have apparently just come from Manchuria, and who take up a surreptitious residence at a local Catholic church. After an uneventful winter, spring arrives and Chu-yōng's group is discovered by one of the local police, who has been attending church services under cover. When he realizes that they are the murder suspects he is looking for, he moves to arrest them and is shot. This brings out both the entire police force and the Japanese military police, who surround the church. The fugitives escape in two groups, with Chu-yōng and some others heading up a cliff overlooking a river. There they engage in a shootout; in the confusion, Chu-yōng falls back on her comrade, sending them both over the precipice to their death. This allows the second group of fugitives to escape, and one of them, a small boy, carries a note given to him by Chu-yōng that says “[We’re] behind you” (*Nanjira no haigo yori*), indicating that the companions must continue the fight, with their comrades now supporting them in death.

As with *Sprouts from Red Earth*, the critical reception of *Behind You* was positive, but the timing of its publication was marked by a crucial difference: in the intervening year between the two books' publication, proletarian literature had emerged as a distinct genre (the term was first used in June 1922), and it now provided what appeared to be a more suitable category for Nakanishi's work than the equivocal “tendency literature.” Critics were quick to deploy the new label, brushing aside several glaring incompatibilities as they zealously set to work in rebranding Nakanishi as *the* representative author of proletarian literature in Japan. The critic and writer Iida Tokutarō (1903–1933), for example, was one of the first to use the label in reference to Nakanishi's works, claiming in a July 1923 review that not only was Nakanishi producing

genuine proletarian literature, but he was the only writer in Japan doing so (Iida 1923). Iida was joined by Maedakō Hiroichirō (1888–1957), who, while not using the term “proletarian literature” specifically to describe *Behind You* (calling it instead “militarized literature,” *busō shita chōhen*), did label Nakanishi as a proletarian author.²

Such platitudes, effective contemporaneously in (re)locating Nakanishi’s works within the emerging genre of proletarian literature, retain value today as an indicator of the theoretical presuppositions inherent in the genre at this early stage of its development. Of particular importance to proletarian literature from its beginnings was a sense of class consciousness (on the part of the industrial proletariat) and internationalism (Murayama 2001, 193). Use of the label by Iida and Maedakō signaled their acceptance of these elements, but it also forced them into a narrow (and futile) search for them. For although class consciousness and proletarian internationalism may have been inherent in the term “proletarian literature,” one would be hard-pressed to find them in Nakanishi’s novel. On the contrary, the fugitives’ concerns are elsewhere entirely, and their lack of interest in both class consciousness and internationalism is displayed in a scene in which they trace their ideological lineage to the Russian Narodniks, nineteenth-century populists whose efforts to overthrow the autocratic tsar had them going “to the people” (*V narod*, which at the time meant “the peasantry”) in an attempt to incite them to revolution (Nakanishi 1923, 77).³ It may have been a call to action for Iida and Maedakō, but in the end *Behind You* is much more concerned with national and agrarian questions, and has precious little to say about either internationalism or the proletariat.

The search for class consciousness and internationalism nevertheless continued, for the prefigured use of the proletarian literary label by Iida and Maedakō forced them to read the story with those issues in mind. Such a reading inevitably led them to the character of Kwōn Chu-yōng, the acknowledged intellectual and spiritual leader of the fugitives. In praising the revolutionary consciousness of *Behind You*, Maedakō devoted much attention to the character of Chu-yōng, calling her one of the everlasting personalities in modern fiction (Maedakō 1923). Maedakō was not alone in his assessment. Not only had many Japanese consumers focused on Chu-yōng as the work’s strongest element, she had from the beginning been its main selling point: the *Asahi Newspaper* (*Asahi shinbun*), for example, billed her as the work’s chief attraction, promising readers a young female revolutionary who would charm them like a bewitching flower while leading them through a sensational series of massacres, rapes, jailbreaks, and vendettas.⁴ She

was considered the key to the novel's authenticity, and it was to her words and deeds that critics looked for evidence to support their interpretations.

As the focus narrowed on Chu-yōng, a conundrum arose for many Japanese critics. They agreed that she was a revolutionary, but there was no consensus concerning what *kind* of revolution she was working toward. She seemed to resist all of their attempts to fit the novel into the proletarian literary genre, and this obliged them to turn their assessments to a mixture of pre- and post-proletarian literary discourses. Working within the latter was Iida, who cast the novel as one about “the revolutionary movement in Korea” (*Chōsen ni okeru kakumei undō*), using the proletarian literary label to imply this as a local facet of worldwide efforts toward proletarian liberation. Maedakō briefly entertained an internationalist reading as well, by surmising that the fugitives could have come from Moscow, but he soon retreated to the older and more nebulous attribution offered by the label “unruly Koreans” (*futei senjin*), an established critical byword connoting Koreans hostile to Japanese imperialism (Kawashima 2009, 154).⁵ Struggling to square Nakanishi's revolutionary message with their own ideology, Iida and Maedakō ignored the characters' own stated intellectual heritage and proceeded to graft onto them both a new proletarian consciousness and an older image of the recalcitrant Korean. The result serves to illustrate the lack of critical tools available to proletarian literature in this, its nascent stage.⁶

Despite their nuances, Iida and Maedakō's interpretations were in consensus regarding the revolutionary value of Nakanishi's body of work. Such harmony was shattered as the book crossed the colonial divide, where the reaction to it among Koreans was far more polarized (Shin 2011, 88). *Behind You* first circulated among Korean students in Japan before making its way to the colony, and one of the first positive responses came from the journalist and writer Yi Ik-sang (1895–1936), who was a founder of the leftist cultural organization PASKYULA, one of two entities that would join to form the KAPF at the time of Nakanishi's visit to Seoul. In fact, Yi was so taken with *Behind You* that in 1924 he wrote to Nakanishi asking for permission to translate it into Korean (Nakanishi eagerly assented). The result was serialized in the *Daily News* (*Maeil shinbo*) from June to November 1924, and then reprinted and sold in book form in June 1926, complete with an introduction by Nakanishi in Japanese.⁷ Yi's own introduction to the translation is instructive in showing how he viewed both the novel and Nakanishi, as well as how he intended Korean readers to see them:

The author of this novel, Chungso Ijijo (Nakanishi Inosuke), is a prominent writer in Japan's present literary scene. He has spent a considerable amount of time in Korea, and his love for Korea is deep and earnest, unrivaled by any other. You could say that his art has grown through feelings of anger and passion at seeing a harassed, lifeless people. Even reading his novel *Sprouts from Red Earth*, one can sense this. What flows through his entire body of work is passion. This passion is the life of his literary works. Now you can see that amply, even in this novel, *Behind You*. The characters and locations appearing in the novel were also gathered in Korea. It is a literary work with strong local color. The special selection of this novel by the translator has been made in order to introduce how "Korea" is reflected in [Japanese] eyes and how Nakanishi gave voice to the things we wanted to say. (Nakanishi 1926, iv)

Immediately apparent in his introduction is the fact that, unlike metropolitan critics like Eguchi, Yi did not hesitate to assign Nakanishi a prominent place in the Japanese literary establishment. Further, he cast Nakanishi as a champion of both Korea and Koreans, and the proletariat and other elements seized on by earlier critics as key aspects of the work are absent. Finally, Nakanishi's passion, considered earlier as symbolic of the absence of objectivity, is here not only objective but is the lifeblood of his entire oeuvre, one that owes its very existence to his time spent in Korea. The result was not only a work based on an understanding of Korean sensibilities but one that served to speak for Koreans, who were deprived of a collective voice. And though Yi alludes to the colony's inability to speak for itself in the phrase "things we wanted to say" (*malhakocha hanŭn kōt*), he nevertheless endorses the arrogation of the right to speak by Nakanishi.

The contrast in objectivity with earlier assessments of Nakanishi is also apparent in Yi's use of the term "local color" (*chibangsaek*), a concept that would have a long history within the Japanese empire. Pressed into service in early metropolitan-area studies of Korea (Workman 2016, 57), it would become a key term in Japanese aesthetic discussions in the 1930s in the form of *chihōshoku*, a celebration of the bucolic tradition of East Asia as a whole (Perry 2014, 131). On the heels of this reimagination would come the so-called Korea Boom of the late 1930s and early 1940s, where the term would descend from its idealistic heights to again represent Korean cultural output, this time with its implicit devaluation as colonial kitsch (Kwon 2015, 106).⁸ Throughout its history, local color—as both *chibangsaek* and *chihōshoku*—would indicate various levels of authenticity, and here Yi helps to lay the groundwork for such an interpretation. His colonial stamp of approval confirms *Behind You* as a realistic and authentic representation of

Korea itself, based on specific localities and characters that live and breathe national consciousness.

The equation of local color with realism had a limit, though, and this was quickly reached with the character of Chu-yǒng. Adding to the commentary on her was the critic Kim Ki-jin (1903–1985), who along with Yi had founded PASKYULA. Kim too had studied in Japan, where he had eagerly read both *Sprouts from Red Earth* and *Behind You* (Kim [1934] 1988, 422). In an article discussing the latter written after his return to Korea in 1923, Kim portrayed Chu-yǒng as a nationalist emblem and an example of the potentially revolutionary role of Korean women in the liberation of their society. He posited that, although Chu-yǒng was dead, her image was very much alive as a model for emulation, and he wondered if Korea could replicate the success of the novel by producing a woman like her in real life. Kim remained skeptical, though, accusing young Korean women of being too easily seduced by the accoutrements of imperialism, and putting their personal interests in Japanese studies, pianos, and parties before the interests of the nation. Kim's alternative, while undoubtedly sincere, was probably not very appealing, as he exhorted them to consider instead the rocky fields and icy winds of their homeland (Kim 1923, 99–100). As local color clashed with reality, the lure of Chu-yǒng as sacrificial lamb for the nation, so attractive to the critic, was all but ignored by those who might follow in her footsteps.

Nor was this the only blow Chu-yǒng would deal to the critical equation of the novel with local color. Kim and Yi's commentary on *Behind You* followed that of earlier critics in holding her to be the salient feature of the novel, but for them she was also the source of a significant amount of real-life controversy (Shin 2011, 89). Although Maedakō had been quick to enshrine her as a modern fictional heroine, for readers such as Kim and Yi she was not fictional at all, for they considered her to be based on the contemporary writer Kim Myǒng-sun (1896–1951). The real life of Kim and the fictional life of Chu-yǒng contained many parallels, but it was only two that mattered: both had studied in Japan during the same period of their lives, and both had reportedly been raped while living there. For readers, this shared trauma facilitated the association of more of Chu-yǒng's characteristics with Kim, particularly her perceived promiscuity. This made the latter furious, and the identification of Kim with the fictional Chu-yǒng proved damaging enough to her reputation that in 1924 she answered back with *T'an-sil and Chu-yǒng* (*T'ansiri wa Chuyǒngi*), an autobiographical retort in which, under her pen name Tan-sil, she refuted many of the incidents in *Behind You*.⁹

Kim's response highlighted the mercurial nature of Nakanishi's works, showing that, despite the unbridled stamp of authenticity given them by readers like Yi and Kim Ki-jin, not everybody equated his local color with realism. Like Ōsugi, Kim accused Nakanishi of having abused the reader's trust in the authority his reputation had given him, and far from simply offering a corrective, *Tan-sil and Chu-yǒng* protested his very right (facilitated by Yi and Kim) to represent and speak on behalf of Koreans. This was easier said than done, though, as Nakanishi's position was being continuously reinforced by the flood of critical interpretations his works were receiving. Additionally, by this point Nakanishi could depend on the wide and rapid dissemination of his work through translation and critical comment, whereas Kim had no such luxury: not only was *Tan-sil and Chu-yǒng* not translated into Japanese, its serialization was suspended before completion (Shin 2011, 96).

It would, in fact, have been very difficult to weaken the link between Nakanishi's realism and authenticity at this point, based as it was on so many facets of critical approval. His readership may have had differing opinions as to the location of Nakanishi's authenticity—whether in proletarian ideology, accurate depiction of local color, or otherwise—but they shared a near-unanimous belief that it was there. With *Sprouts from Red Earth*, the avalanche of sentimentalism and self-serving hubris (identified by Eguchi and Ōsugi, respectively) had not been enough to dissuade critics from declaring it a landmark publication. In turn, the concentrated efforts of readers like Iida and Maedakō to locate the internationalist subjectivity called for by proletarian literature in *Behind You* led them to extoll it as a revolutionary work. For Kim and Yi, authenticity was to be found in the character of *Chu-yǒng* and Nakanishi's passion, both of which had a basis in Korean nationalist sentiment. By the time the critical adulation reached high tide in 1925, Nakanishi had been hailed as an advocate of almost every conceivable revolutionary cause.

There remained, however, important unresolved issues, and these presaged chronic difficulties to come. First, critical attention to the national question in Nakanishi's work had remained sporadic and superficial, and only after tortuous theoretical permutations was it able to coexist with the requisite emphasis on proletarian subjectivity. Second, the lack of investigation into both works' stated interest in the agrarian question was to become increasingly harder to justify. Looming in the background of the novels was an amorphous peasant class, and Nakanishi spent a significant amount of time and space trying to tackle the question himself by first

injecting the peasantry with a subjectivity in *Sprouts from Red Earth* before exploring its revolutionary potential in *Behind You*. The fact that critics failed to acknowledge these attempts is even more striking considering his peasant background; recall that Kim Ki-ho's dispossession at the hands of the state in *Sprouts from Red Earth* had earlier been experienced by Nakanishi's own family. These issues would not be omnipresent (the development of a Korean proletarian subjectivity in the period between the wars, for example, allowed the national question at least to be held in abeyance in conjunction with the advance of proletarian literature), but they would continue to haunt his works, as well as proletarian cultural production in general, throughout the colonial period. In 1925, though, such things went unnoticed in the euphoria surrounding the empire-wide rise of declarations of support for international proletarian liberation. The period coincided with the peak of Nakanishi's esteem, and as he had by now moved toward a position in support of Marxism-Leninism himself, it was only natural that he would play a prominent role in translating these declarations of support into concrete organizations dedicated to the propagation of a Marxist-Leninist proletarian culture.

Seoul, August 1925: Founding the Chosŏn P'ŭrollet'aria Yesulga Tongmaeng

The occasion for Nakanishi's visit to Seoul in August 1925 was a conference supported by four organizations: the Korean Labor Party (Chosŏn Nodong Dang), the Proletariat League (Musanja Tongmaenghoe), the Tuesday Society (Hwayohoe, named after Marx's birthday), and the North Wind Society (Pukp'unghoe). Also involved were key figures from PASKYULA, such as Kim and Yi, as well as members of the Spark Society (Yŏmgunsa), the two groups that would shortly merge into KAPF. Nakanishi made the trip with the feminist activist Oku Mumeo (1895–1997), with whom he was scheduled to give several speeches.¹⁰ The first, given at the Chongno Youth Hall on August 15, was on the use of the materialist conception of history in literature. The second speech, delivered at the Konghoedang the following day, was entitled “In Praise of Humanity” (“Ningen raisan”).

It was the latter address that proved controversial, and its violent breakup by knife-wielding thugs was widely reported by the press in the following days. There were, however, notable variations in the coverage: *Seoul Daily* (*Keijō nippō*), a Japanese-language paper, blamed Nakanishi's Korean audience for the disorder, citing an apparent dissatisfaction with his speech. Korean outlets such as the *Chosŏn Daily* (*Chosŏn ilbo*) and *Tong-A Daily* (*Tong-A ilbo*) accused

a local contingent of the right-wing Japanese National Essence Association (Dai Nihon Kokusuikai) of inciting the violence.¹¹ Regardless of who was at fault, Nakanishi's remaining lectures were canceled, and so instead of giving a final speech on August 17, he went with members of PASKYULA and the Spark Society to a restaurant where the two groups agreed to combine into the Korean Artist Proletarian Federation (Chosŏn P'ŭrollet'aria Yesulga Tongmaeng); the new organization would later adopt its more well-known Esperanto name, the Korean Artista Proletaria Federatio, or KAPF (see figure 1).

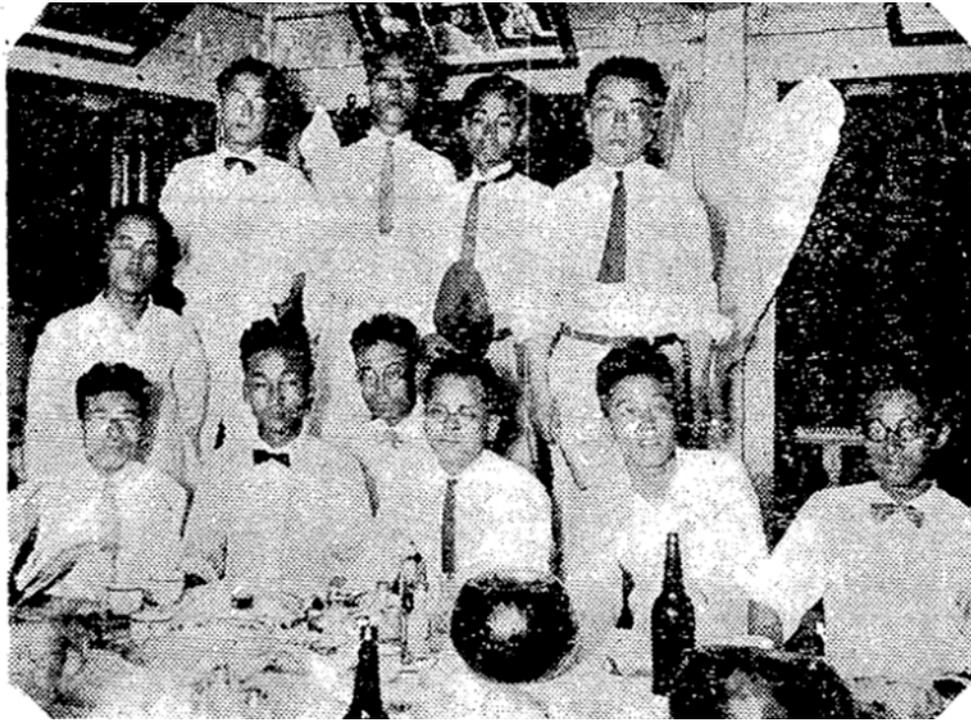


Figure 1. Founding the Korean Artist Proletarian Federation (KAPF), Seoul, August 17, 1925. Nakanishi is seated in the front, fourth from left. Standing in the middle of the back row is Kim Ki-jin, and on the far right is Yi Ik-Sang, translator of *Behind You*. Source: *Yomiuri shinbun* (1925, 4). Photo © *Yomiuri shinbun*.

The merger of PASKYULA and the Spark Society into the KAPF resulted in an organization that was to dominate the sphere of leftist artistic production for many years as it endeavored to create a culture to aid in the struggle for proletarian revolution. As a direct response to the 1924 appeal by the Communist International calling for the establishment of revolutionary writers organizations, though, this meant that its goals were to be achieved within a

specifically Marxist-Leninist framework. Such a stance was reflected in many of the organization's slogans and platforms (Park 2015, 45). Nakanishi's participation in the KAPF's creation was an extension of his efforts throughout the summer of 1925 to set up a similar organization in Japan, and after returning to Tokyo he took a leading role in founding the metropole's first proletarian cultural group, the Japan Proletarian Literary Arts League (JPLAL), in December 1925. The JPLAL would in a few short years attain its own preeminence in the arena of cultural production under the reconstituted Esperanto title, Nippona Artista Proleta Federacio, or NAPF. As with the KAPF, the JPLAL was committed to working within the Communist International-defined concept of proletarian culture.¹²

Though the KAPF strove to conform to the doctrine as understood and propagated by the Communist International, the national and agrarian questions lingered. Moreover, these were not the only elements in conflict with the dictates of Communist International-style proletarian literature, for in the slogans and proclamations of their initial years one finds in both the KAPF and the JPLAL traces of influence from an earlier competitor for the position of proletarian cultural arbiter, the international Proletkult movement. The Proletkult had disappeared by 1923, but its influence was still widely felt, and Nakanishi's participation in the KAPF and the JPLAL, coupled with their uniform divergence from Communist International doctrine in favor of earlier Proletkult ideology in the wording of many of their founding statements, provides convincing evidence of the KAPF's influence on the formation of the JPLAL.¹³

Soon the Marxist-Leninist ideology of proletarian literature promoted by the KAPF and the JPLAL was extended to Nakanishi's own writings. Theoretical inadequacies of the genre, earlier manifested in critical attempts to circumvent both the national and agrarian questions through the application of any available terminology, were forgotten in the emergence of class as the genre's central concern. The redefinition of his works as reflective of proletarian internationalism quickly vitiated other interpretations of his novels that many readers had found valuable. There were benefits to this consolidation, though, chiefly in the fact that it brought together the many meanings of Nakanishi. The initial assessment of *Sprouts from Red Earth*, for example, had viewed its treatment of class and ethnic conflict separately, as Japanese looked on the peninsula as a battleground for their own class warfare, leaving Koreans largely out of it. However, a widened concept of class now brought the Korean masses to the forefront as partners in the common struggle for the international liberation of the proletariat. Similarly, with *Behind*

You, initial confusion about the revolutionary intent of Chu-yǒng and her compatriots was cleared by the attribution of a proletarian subjectivity that allowed Yi Ik-sang to add to his prior praise of the novel as an instance of local color the further declaration of it as an exemplary application of socialist thought to literature (Shin 2011, 92.)

While in general these readings of Nakanishi illustrate the difficulty of reducing any work to a single interpretation, they also show that, in their enthusiasm for the proletarian cause, critics and writers of the metropole had perhaps gotten slightly ahead of themselves in assuming that Koreans would easily put the national question aside in favor of a joint interest in internationalism, something that any Marxist could have explained to them as impossible.¹⁴ Nevertheless, by 1925 this was a moot point, as the plurality of readings of Nakanishi had been subsumed by an enthusiasm for the Marxist-Leninist proletarian culture that appeared to be sweeping all before it. And while the centrality of class to proletarian literature (including Nakanishi's writings) was never able to edge out national or ethnic concerns (Perry 2014, 144), the positive aspect to all of this was that, starting in August 1925, there was no longer any confusion or ambiguity regarding Nakanishi's intent. Official codification of his works as proletarian literature had bridged the divide, bringing all sides into agreement and ensuring that, despite the odd protest from an Ōsugi or Kim Myōng-sun (which would become increasingly rare), critical understanding of the name Nakanishi Inosuke would from this point forward be synonymous with that of Chungśō Ijijo.¹⁵

Conclusion: The Horizon of (Re)Interpretation

The destruction of the proletarian literary movement in the 1930s and its subsequent consignment to the dustbin of literary history meant a renewed freedom of interpretation vis-à-vis Nakanishi's corpus (it also meant a return to prison for Nakanishi himself). In the metropole, he was again banished to the literary periphery, but in Korea his reputation as an advocate of Korean nationalism was almost immediately recovered, and an attempt was made there to include him in the initial forging of a Korean national literary canon. In the June 1936 issue of the journal *Three Thousand Leagues (Samch'ōlli)*, a discussion was held on how to define Korean literature, and several arguments were put forth by the contributors on factors such as ethnic and linguistic requirements. However, a dissenting opinion was raised that, if such parameters were strictly followed, authors such as Nakanishi, who wrote about Korean

sensibilities, would be excluded, as he was neither Korean nor writing in the Korean language (Kwon 2015, 31).¹⁶

Further interpretive revisions of Nakanishi followed the collapse of the empire in 1945. This time, it was the creation of the postwar proletarian literary canon, particularly through the efforts of writer and critic Yamada Seizaburō (1896–1987) in his seminal *History of Proletarian Literature (Puroretaria bungakushi)*, in which Nakanishi's legacy became fused with his earliest works, now given great prominence. *Sprouts from Red Earth*, so baffling to critics upon its release, was inserted triumphantly at the very fount of proletarian literature; moreover, its chief import was no longer solely about proletarian revolution, for according to Yamada the criminality of Japanese imperialism so boldly disclosed by the work had new relevance to a postwar Japan then emerging from its own period of foreign occupation (Yamada 1954, 291).¹⁷ As for Nakanishi himself, he continued to write sporadically but had by this time embarked on a political career, serving two terms in the House of Representatives as a Communist Party member before his death in 1958.

The reinterpretation of Nakanishi's works continues to this day, most recently in a 2014 Korean translation of *Sprouts from Red Earth*. In this translation, the importance of many of the issues raised almost a century ago by both Japanese and Korean critics has been reaffirmed. In his introduction to the work, the translator, Pak Hyōn-sōk, returns to the passion inherent in the novel, calling it a testament to Nakanishi's fondness for Korean culture. This echoes the earlier statements of both Eguchi and Yi, the latter of whom had gone even further in calling it Nakanishi's chief virtue as a writer. Time has brought the parties into agreement on other points as well, as the description of local customs and manners that Eguchi had earlier decried as tedious and distracting is viewed much the same by Pak, who posits that the obsolescence of many of these customs will render them baffling to contemporary Korean readers, who should simply view them as historical curios and evidence of Nakanishi's emotional attachment to the peninsula (Nakanishi 2014, 6).

There is also a new interpretation on offer. Emblazoned on the cover of the translation is the statement that the book is something one would want to recommend to an increasingly right-wing Japan, and in the introduction Pak repeats the claim of a contemporary Japan moving politically and dangerously to the right. *Sprouts from Red Earth* is here offered as a native antidote for extremism, and so in addition to Nakanishi's previous value as whistleblower of an

exploitative imperialism, proponent of Korean nationalism, advocate for proletarian revolution, purveyor of local color, and potential figure of Korean national literature is added the new role of mediator in disputes between the contemporary nation-states of Japan and South Korea. And so it is that the interpretation of Nakanishi is again made pliant to the whims of expediency, as the reading of the book is thrown up as a challenge to the Japanese right wing, demonstrating once again the ability of his works to serve different ideological ends simultaneously. And while the translator might be disappointed to learn that the Greater Japan National Essence Association has long since disbanded and is therefore unable to respond to his challenge, he might be pleased to know that there are undoubtedly many modern successors able to do so. Whether they would be willing, however, is another matter.

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Notes

- 1 Although the Chosŏn P'ürollet'aria Yesulga Tongmaeng is best known by its Esperanto acronym KAPF (Korea Artista Proletaria Federatio), that title was not actually adopted until 1927 (I 2003, 53–54). For the sake of convenience, however, the acronym will be used throughout this article.
- 2 Maedakō was in a privileged position to judge a work “proletarian.” Returning to Japan in 1920 after over a decade spent in the United States, he propagated the proletarian style of novel, which was based on his understanding of works such as Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* (which he also translated). His influence during the early period of proletarian literature came mostly through his membership in the coterie journal *The Sower* (Tane maku hito), where he served, along with Aono Suekichi, as one of two chief proletarian literary theorists.
- 3 The “to the people” approach of the Narodniks and its applicability to Korea would later be investigated from a different angle by Yi Kwang-Su, one of the most esteemed writers of the colonial era, who explored the motif in several of his works in the 1930s. But whereas Yi’s return to the soil has been explained as an attempt to solve the problems of modernity through a return to the countryside, in line with the fascist aesthetic of blood and soil, the Narodniks and Nakanishi viewed the countryside as something that needed to be brought into modernity. See Workman (2016, 89–90).
- 4 *Asahi shinbun*, October 3, 1923.
- 5 The term *futei* was not limited to resistance against the Japanese, being applied to other anti-colonial movements, such as that of Ireland, as well (Heigu [Haag] 2011, 86).

- Maedakō in his speculation draws a possible link with the nationalist aspirations of the Korean fugitives and those of the Irish.
- 6 The lack of analytical tools for identifying proletarian literature proper would be addressed by the critic Aono Suekichi in his 1926 essay “Natural Growth and Purposeful Consciousness” (Shizen seichō to mokuteki ishiki), wherein he located the essence of proletarian literature in its expression of class consciousness. For him, this “purposeful consciousness” was paramount in constructing a proletarian literary movement, giving writers something to strive for and critics something to look for. Their search for class consciousness placed Iida and Maedakō ahead of the curve, therefore, but hardly helped them locate it. For a translation of Aono’s essay, see Bowen-Struyk and Field (2016, 91–94).
- 7 *Behind You* was not the only one of Nakanishi’s novels that Yi would translate. In 1926 (a full two years before it was published in Japan), he translated and serialized *Hot wind* (Neppū) in the *Chosŏn Ilbo*. Nakanishi’s apparent enthusiasm for the consumption of his products in Korea can be seen in notes he left for both Korean translators and readers, which contained, among other things, contextual explanations for the use of certain words. See Thornber (2009, 176).
- 8 Nakanishi would also anticipate one of the biggest instances of colonial kitsch with his translation of *The Tale of Ch’unhyang* (Ch’unhyangjŏn), published in the journal *Women’s Reconstruction* (Josei kaizō) in 1924. The story served as the basis for his August 15 speech, where he analyzed it in historical materialist terms. For a discussion of the centrality of *Ch’unhyangjŏn* to colonial kitsch, see Kwon (2015, 108–130).
- 9 Kim Myōng-sun’s rape occurred in 1915 and was reported in the *Maeil shinbo* (Shin 2011, 95). However, refuting rumors about Kim’s life in Japan might have been only part of the impetus behind the work. Slanderous accounts of her upbringing and family background were also in need of clarification (Kim 2010, 16). *Behind You* is mentioned specifically in the work, however.
- 10 While Nakanishi’s activities in Seoul that August have garnered much of the historical attention, it bears mentioning that in contemporary media coverage he was given equal, and in several cases less, billing than Oku Mumeo as the featured guest of the conference. Reporters from the Japanese-language papers especially tailed her every move on the way to and from Seoul, pressing her for comment about where she was staying and whom she was meeting, and giving detailed descriptions of her fashion.
- 11 The Greater Japan National Essence Society had originally been created in 1919 as a patriotic society, and it later became a tool for strikebreaking and combating leftist influence in society as a whole. See Garon (1987, 133).
- 12 The consolidation of proletarian literature in the Soviet Union, and its subsequent export through the Communist International, was a contentious process involving the marginalization and repudiation of a wide array of ideas concerning the creation of proletarian culture advocated by, among others, Leon Trotsky and the Proletkult. Its official codification in 1924 was a direct result of the political defeat of these groups.
- 13 In fact, the opening declarations of the KAPF and the JPLAL are virtually identical. The KAPF’s first plank, wherein the group resolves “to establish a proletarian cultural organization on the ‘eve of the light’ [*kwangmyōng ūi chōnya*]” is echoed by the JPLAL’s intention to “found a fighting proletarian culture of the dawn [*reimeiki*].” In its

- second plank, the KAPF declares its intent to “unite and establish a proletarian cultural movement as a third front [*choe sam chōnsōn*],” prefiguring the JPLAL’s intent to do battle with the culture of the ruling class and its supporters “in the wide field of cultural struggle [*bunka sensen*].” One might be tempted to see in these declarations simply an adherence to Communist International doctrine, and while both groups were undoubtedly set up in response to the 1924 appeal, the references to proletarian culture as a “third front” at the “eve” or “dawn” (of a socialist society) show vestiges of the earlier Proletkult terminology, which had first brought to prominence the concept of the cultural struggle as a third front (following the political and economic fronts). For a further examination of the founding planks of the groups, as well as their similarity to other entities such as the Spark Society and the Japanese journal *Literary Front* (*Bungei sensen*), see Yu (2002, 391–392).
- 14 On the primacy of nationalism over internationalism, one could cite Lenin, who said that “in the internationalist education of the workers of the oppressor countries, emphasis must necessarily be laid on their advocating freedom for the oppressed countries to secede and their fighting for it. Without this there can be *no* internationalism” (Lenin 1964, 346). Clearly, nationalist aspirations needed to have been met before internationalism could be considered.
- 15 One of the earlier canonizations of Nakanishi as a proletarian author was in Aono Suekichi’s *Marxist Literary Struggle* (*Marukusushugi bungaku tōsō*), where he places Nakanishi and *Sprouts from Red Earth* in the “first period” of proletarian literature along with other figures, such as Maedakō. See Aono (1929, 172).
- 16 The consideration of Nakanishi for the Korean literary canon provides an interesting expansion on the transculturative model discussed by Karen Thornber, who explains how translations of metropolitan (and Western) literature challenged local colonial canons, affirming and denying the cultural capital of the metropole in the process (Thornber 2009, 87). In this case, though, the challenge Nakanishi’s works presented was not to any existing canon but to the *creation* of one, and were Nakanishi to be woven into the Korean canonical fabric, the cultural capital he would increase would be not Japanese but Korean. Perhaps an understanding of this is what impelled his defenders to overlook ethnic considerations and advocate for his inclusion.
- 17 For a discussion of the importance of Yamada Seizaburō and his work in the creation of the proletarian literary canon, both in Japan and the United States, see Bowen-Struyk (2001, 2–7).

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