

Article

Communist Visions for Korea's Future: The 1920-30s*

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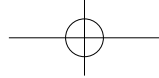
Introduction: Communism in the Core and on the Periphery

Communism, one of the defining socio-political movements of the twentieth century, presents a historian with a serious problem of definition. What was exactly Communism's goal? The answer heavily depends on where in the capitalist world-system the Communist movement in question happened to be geographically situated (Wallerstein 2004). Even a brief overview of Communist programs and stated aims will clearly show that they tended to significantly vary from one world-systemic zone to another. The eventual attainment of Communism—a dialectic anti-thesis to the industrial capitalist society in which the society would democratically control its economic machinery (rather than being itself controlled by the profit-driven economic forces)—was, of course, the common goal for all the Communist movements.¹ Beyond that, however, the stated objectives tended to greatly vary, largely encompassing everything that the radicalized intellectuals, who usually formed the bulk of the Communist cadres, saw as the “masses” progressive demands. And these demands could not but diverge, as both radicalized intellectuals and the subaltern majorities they wished to mobilize, possessed and exhibited vastly different desires and demands in the diverse zones of the world economy.

Commonly, the Russian Bolsheviks—first a faction inside the Russian Social-Democratic Revolutionary Party, or RSDRP (1903-1912) and then an independent political party (since 1912)—are considered the pioneer Communists who initiated the decisive break from more moderate Social Democracy following their successful revolution in October 1917 (a good synopsis of Bolsheviks' pre-revolutionary history is Woods 1999). However, even a cursory overview of the Bolshevik programs prior to the October Revolution will reveal a noticeable lack of attention to the concrete content of Bolshevik's eventual aim, a classless socialist, or communist, society. Instead—as, for example, the Bolshevik draft for the resolutions of the Fifth RSDRP Congress (London, 1907) shows us—the Bolshevik faction wanted to concentrate its

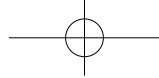
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1. For the outline histories of Communist movements worldwide, see Pons 2014; Priestland 2010.



efforts on “finalizing the democratic revolution under proletariat’s hegemony” and with active participation of peasants, establishing a “democratic republic” in Russia, achieving eight-hour working days and other working-class demands inside the framework of such a republic and satisfying peasantry’s wish for equal redistribution of agrarian land. The struggle for further movement towards socialism was to take place only after radical democratization would be achieved (Yaroslavsky 1935, 720-26). In Russia, a semi-peripheral country commonly referred to as “backward” in the contemporaneous parlance (Kagarlitsky 2008), Communist movement could not but represent, first and foremost, the most radical (democratic) modernizational tendencies. A significant portion of top-level Bolshevik cadres (according to Liliana Riga, ca. two-thirds) belonged to various ethnic minorities excluded from and often oppressed by the mainstream society of the Russian Empire; democratic resolution of “national question” thus figured prominently on the list of Bolshevik demands (Riga 2012, 4-8). In fact, early Bolsheviks’ attentiveness to minorities’ plight was later to play a significant role in heightening Communism’s popularity among colonial-era Korean intellectuals, themselves a minority in an oppressive multiethnic empire.

The next, post-revolutionary Bolshevik Party program, adopted in 1919 by the Eighth Party Congress, represented an interesting combination of socialist radicalism—including the declared task of substituting monetary exchange with the planned, state-wide redistribution network based on existing cooperatives, as well as the appeal by trade unions to take over the job of managing the nationalized parts of the industrial economy—with developmentalist topics. The “utmost development of the productive forces,” rather than immediate attainment of socialism, constituted the core of the Party’s economic program (*Vos'moi s'yezd rossiyskoi kommunisticheskoi partii bol'shevikov: Stenograficheskiy otchet* 337-55). Anything else could hardly be expected in a semi-peripheral country where the victorious Bolsheviks presided over a mostly agrarian economy largely destroyed by the world war, internal strife, and war mobilizations. By contrast, the initial program of the German Communist Party (1918) did not mention the “development of productive forces” at all, focusing on purely socialist economic propositions (confiscations of the large and middle-sized enterprises and their socialization with subsequent control over the production by workers’ councils etc.) (*Protokoll des gründungsparteitags der kommunistischen partei Deutschlands* 1918). In the core regions of the world-system, Communism initially represented socialist radicalism in its pure form, with little traces of the



general democratization aspirations or developmentalist visions.

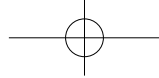
As for the colonial possessions of the European powers, which formed much of the world-systemic periphery in the early twentieth-century world, international Communist strategy uniformly emphasized national liberation first, often to the degree that the Communist movements in the colonial and other peripheral societies should be academically referred to as a sort of mass-based leftist nationalism. Comintern (The Communist International, 1919-1943), the main guiding organ of the Communist movement in the inter-war period, accentuated the “united front” strategy and tactics in the colonies and “semi-colonial” (non-colonized dependent) societies since its inception. The nascent Communist parties and movements were to prioritize the national liberation issue and block with non-socialist radicals and even “bourgeois nationalists,” without, however, losing their organizational independence and a vision of ensuring the Communist hegemony in the national emancipatory struggle.² Seen in this way, Chalmers Johnson’s (1962) famed thesis on Chinese Communism evolving into a political vehicle of peasant nationalism by the late 1930s simply states the obvious. Chinese Communism had to put square emphasis on national tasks from the very beginning. As it was forced to rely more on the mobilization of peasants rather than the work among urban workers by the Nationalist (Guomindang) repressions since 1928, it had, by necessity, to articulate peasants’ demands for a modicum of national sovereignty, stable order, and social justice—combining them, of course, with the developmentalist visions of the Communist cadres.³

Existing scholarship well establishes that the pioneering Korean Communists—most of them originating from the ranks of nationalist intelligentsia themselves—were working in the 1920s on the premises of the Comintern’s “united front” strategy, constantly attempting to block with radical nationalists in order to further their first priority, namely the national-liberation struggle.⁴ The radical turn in Korean Communist platform in the late 1920s—early 1930s was also extensively discussed in existing literature; it is commonly seen as being influenced by both, external (changes in Comintern’s line) and

2. See, for example, very detailed debates on the “Eastern question” by the 1922 Fourth Congress of Comintern: Riddell 2011, 649-789.

3. On these visions, see Chen and Galenson 1969, 33-50.

4. See, for example, Scalapino and Lee 1972, 3-66.



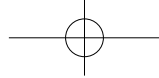
domestic (grassroots radicalization, upsurge in strikes and riots, etc.) factors.⁵ A number of authors analyzed also the shift from the emphasis on the “bourgeois-democratic revolution” to the vision of a more Soviet-inspired statehood coming immediately after the national liberation, in the Communist programs, as well as the move towards acceptance of the anti-fascist “united front” tactics in the late 1930s.⁶ What, however, seems to be undervalued, is the general modernizational impulse palpable in the Korean Communist programmatic and analytical documents of the 1920s and 1930s, as well as the democratic aspirations—akin to the democratic emphasis of the pre-revolutionary Bolshevik programs mentioned above—visible in these documents. In our article, we will argue that, in these initial years, the Communists of Korea rather successfully attempted to build up a program of democratic, mass mobilization-based revolutionary struggle towards independence, modernization, and social welfare development, finely attuned to the existing discursive landscape of the Korean society. Their programs, while undergoing important alterations following the changes in domestic and international situation, were still consistent in certain points. They were meant to articulate broad modern and democratic demands by diverse subaltern strata of the colonial-era society, harmonise national aspirations with a universalist, non-nationalist worldview and maneuver towards a broad anti-colonial alliance while steering clear of the more conservative elements of mainstream Korean society. The strength of the colonial apparatus of police repression did, of course, prevent them from prosecuting a successful revolution on their own; however, their efforts represented the beginning of a movement for democratic and radical modernization by mass mobilization and for masses’ benefit—and this movement was to exert a decisive influence on Korean peninsula’s history in the second half of the twentieth century.

Korean Communist Programs: Between National Revolution and “People’s Democracy”

The programs of the earlier Korean Communist organizations give an

5. See, for example, Im 1994.

6. See, for example, Im 1992; U 1989.



impression of overzealous revolutionary optimism. As Civil War was continuing in Russia and the remembrances of the great March First, 1919, mass uprising were vivid in recent memory, the national activists-turned-Communists were filling their programs with maximal objectives, most radical demands, and fierce rhetoric. The “Shanghai” Communist Party—led jointly by national movement veterans-turned-Communists (such as Yi Donghwi, 1873-1935) and some Russian-born Korean radicals (such as Bak Jinsun, 1897-1938)—put forward the demand for establishing a “Korean Soviet Government under the dictatorship of the proletariat” in Korea into the inaugural *Manifesto* it adopted at its May 1921 Congress in Shanghai. There was, however, very little concrete detail on how this “Korean proletarian government” was to proceed further once it is established. The *Platform of the Korean Communist Party* mentioned “nationalization of all production facilities and transport,” as well as “compulsory and free primary education, labour duty for everybody, emancipation of women,” etc. without further mention of how it was all to be achieved under the specifically Korean conditions. Korean independence, however, was mentioned as the main prerequisite to furthering the socialist revolution in Korea (Suh 1970, 25-33).⁷ All in all, the *Manifesto* and *Platform* looked more declarative than practical.

The rivals of the “Shanghai” Party, the “Irkutsk” Communist Party—mostly staffed by Russian-born and Russian-speaking, Maritime Province-based Koreans with little ties to the pre-existing nationalist movement—were just as zealously radical, but concurrently more attentive to the minute details of their plans for Korea’s socialist future. The *Theses on the Agrarian Issues*, adopted by the inaugural congress of the “Irkutsk” Communist Party (May 1921), mentions building a “Workers’ and Peasants’ Soviet Republic” in independent Korea, to join the world federation of Soviet republics. In addition to confiscation and re-distribution of all the landlords’ and (Japanese) state land, it also mentions a state-organized supply of the agricultural machinery to the peasants, as soon as such machinery would be shipped to Soviet Korea “from the Soviet republics of the West,” and beginning of the collectivization of the peasantry—so far, only with the use of the idle land. Poorer Japanese settlers in Korea were invited to join, too, and promised, in the best internationalist spirit,

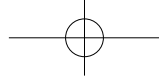
7. More on “Shanghai” Communist Party is to be found in Im 2003, 194-210; 375-96.

equal rights with Korean peasants. As for the workers, the *Theses on the Labour Issues* promised them full nationalization of all industries (excluding the smallest shops without wage labour), eight-hour working days, prohibition of female and children labour in the industries involving health dangers, free-of-charge medical services, state-managed pensions, free adult education, and industry-wide (rather than individual factory-based) labour unions (Vanin 2004, 69-75). These programmatic documents give an impression of rhetoric zeal rather than pragmatic planning; however, a number of points mentioned here (elements of workers' welfare etc.) will continuously appear in the later programs of the Korean Communists as well, acquiring an aura of pragmatic actuality as industrial capitalism progressed in Korea, making it realistically possible to think about implementing some measure of redistributive justice.

By the time the (underground) Korean Communist Party was organized in Gyeongseong (Seoul) in April 1925, however, the Communists of Korea fully accepted the Comintern theory of two-stage revolution. According to this theory, the first stage of such revolution had to consist of national liberation combined with full-scale democratization which would facilitate the further struggle for a genuinely socialist revolution.⁸ In fact, Comintern tended to view even the coming revolution in Korea's colonial metropole, Japan, as a "bourgeois-democratic" one aiming at abolishing such "feudal-absolutist elements" of Japan's post-Meiji structure as imperial system or "feudal land tenure in the countryside"—contrary to the views of some Japanese radicals (the so-called Rōnōha, or "Labour and Peasants' Faction") who were willing to opt for an immediate revolutionary transformation to socialism.⁹ By contrast, German Communist Party's 1924 *Action Programme* emphasized, with Comintern's blessing, the task of turning Germany into a Soviet-type state, to be accomplished through "politization of factories," introduction of Workers' Councils to control the process of production, formation of Red Guards, and "disarming the bourgeoisie" (Fowkes 2014, 291-92). Germany, however, was judged to be an advanced capitalist society ripe for the task of socialist revolution here and now, unlike both Japan and Korea. Thus, the new-born Korean

8. On the Comintern theory of two-stage revolutions in less advanced societies, see McKenzie 1964, 68-76.

9. See the related documents in Ishidō and Yamabe 1961, 46-75.



Communist Party did not have to bother itself with the detailed descriptions of future life in the “Korean Soviet Republic,” concentrating itself on the details of the anti-colonial revolution.

Unfortunately, much of its future plans remain unknown to us. Korean Communist Party’s inaugural congress (April 17, 1925) adopted no official program, entrusting instead its Central Executive Committee with undertaking this task (Jeon 2006, 221). Its representative to Moscow, Jo Dongho (1892-1954), relayed to Comintern in his report on the event that the resolution of the inaugural congress expressed Communists’ willingness to facilitate the pan-national anti-imperialist movement and to struggle against both Japanese and ethnic Korean capitalists. It also appealed to its supporters to gather under Comintern’s banner, struggle for organizing workers and peasants for independence cause and against Japanese capitalism, and fight against hated Oriental Development Company¹⁰ and Christianity (Shirinya and Wada 2007, 332).¹¹ This program was obviously under-developed and rather schematic, including the apparently untimely topic of anti-religious struggle (hardly fitting to the Korean situation, where Christianity was one of the few religions not to be placed under direct control of the colonial powers).¹² Indeed, in its September 21, 1925 resolution on Korea the Oriental Bureau of Comintern implicitly disavowed the theme of anti-religious struggle, demanding that Korean Communists instead penetrate religious organization and agitate among their rank-and-file members against the opportunistic attitudes of religious leaders (Shirinya and Wada 2007, 340).¹³

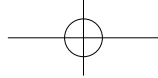
As a result, the next programmatic document—the *Declaration of Korean Communist Party*, published by a group of émigré Korean Communists in Shanghai, in their journal, *Bulkkot* (*The Flowers of Fire*; No. 7, September 1926)—was much more coherent and richer on details. It envisioned Korean independence to be restored through a national revolution under the proletarian hegemony, which, however, even the Korean bourgeoisie was allowed to join. As

10. On this colonial establishment, see Kurose 2003.

11. The original is to be found in the Russian State Archive of Social and Political History: РГАСПИ ф.495 оп.135 д.1106 л. 132-39.

12. For further detail, see Kang 1997, 43-61.

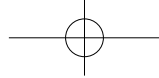
13. The original is to be found in the Russian State Archive of Social and Political History: РГАСПИ ф.495 оп.135 д.104 л. 60-62.



the result of such a revolution, a democratic republic, which would additionally practice a “people’s militia” system in its military policy, was to be established to guarantee the equality of sexes, freedom of trade union organization and strikes, eight-hour working days, and free education to all under 16 in the Korean (rather than Japanese) language. The new-born democratic Korea was to enter a friendly alliance with the USSR and redistribute the lands of larger landowners, as well as the land holdings of the Japanese state and quasi-state organizations (Oriental Development Company etc.), to land-hungry Korean peasants. However, full land reform was to happen only after further revolutionary successes—for the period of “democratic revolution,” the tenants had to be content with the tenancy rate reduction to 30 percent of harvest, waiting for full and total land redistribution in the future. Obviously, rather moderate positions on the issues of industry nationalization and full land redistribution—neither was mentioned among the immediate revolutionary tasks—were meant to attract Korean propertied classes into the united anti-colonial front with the Korean Communists.¹⁴

A similar picture of the Communist vision for Korea’s immediate revolutionary future emerges from the 17 original slogans of the Korean Communist Party mentioned by a ranking Party cadre, Gim Chan (1894-?), during his interrogation by Japanese police in 1931. These slogans include, of course, the appeal for Korea’s complete national liberation. At the same time, however, the Communists urged the peasants to refuse paying tenant fees to Japanese landowners only (by implication, the tenancy contracts among Koreans were still to be honoured). On the social side, eight-hour working days (six hours for minors), minimum wage, unemployment benefits, maternity benefits, and paid maternity leaves for women were mentioned, together with compulsory and free public education and professional training. Nationalization of factories was omitted, however (qtd. in Suh 1970, 140-41). One foreign source for the Korean Communist welfare aspirations was most like the USSR which was one of the pioneers in social welfare development in the 1920s. 1920s’ Soviet history saw the introduction of old-age pensions for urban workers (past the age of 60 for men and 55 for women), as well as unemployment benefits for the workers in the urban formal sector (amounting to ca. 95 percent of the average salary)

14. See full text in Yeoksa Bipyong (1926) 1992; qtd. in Jeon 2006, 219-24.

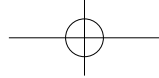


and maternity leaves (six weeks before and after delivery for the women engaged in physical labour). The eight-hour working day and shortened working day for minors were among the proudest original achievements of post-revolutionary social policies (Lebina et al. 2007). Soviet social policies, for example, the introduction of obligatory primary schooling and the efforts to “liquidate illiteracy” among the adults, as well as maternity protections laws, were routinely reported even in the colonial-era mainstream Korean dailies.¹⁵ Yet another foreign reference could have been Weimar Germany, the capitalist state where the Left, with its social demands, played a significant political role. Since 1927, Germany had twelve-week maternity leave, although it did not cover all the categories of the working women (Usborne 1992, 49).

The project of pan-national anti-colonial revolution and re-building independent Korea into a democratic state with very prominent welfarist elements, given shape in the Communist programmatic documents of 1925-1926, continued to dominate the Communist visions of the future throughout the rest of the colonial period. The ultimate aim of the Communist movement, namely the socialist society, was mostly given only very general descriptions. By contrast, the first, national-liberational and democratic stage of the Korean revolution, was to be described beforehand in abundant details, in order to popularize Communists’ aims and establish Communist authority inside the ranks of the national movement in general. Indeed, as time elapsed and Communist work in mass organizations progressed, their descriptions of Korea’s post-revolutionary democratic future were becoming increasingly elaborate and popularly attractive.

One of such descriptions—in a way, a more radical one than the programmatic documents of 1925-1926—was the *Theses* of the Party on the general political situation and Party’s imminent tasks in Korea, adopted by the Third Congress on February 27, 1928. Supposed to be sent to Moscow as the Party’s report to Comintern, they can now only be found in Japanese police documents, in Japanese translation. The *Theses* was advocating the struggle for a “people’s republic” in Korea, on the understanding that the pre-conditions needed for building a “Soviet republic” were so far absent. The “people’s republic” was to ensure the withdrawal of the Japanese army and police, as

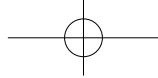
15. See, for example, Anonymous 1929; Anonymous 1931.



well as confiscation and redistribution (to the Korean peasants) of the land previously owned by the Japanese companies as well as Korean “aristocrats.” Significantly, the tenants were to hold indefinitely the land they used to lease, without having to pay tenant fees any longer. This radicalization was most likely related to the “lessons of the Chinese revolution” mentioned in the analytical part of the *Theses*: as the Nationalist coup against their erstwhile Communist allies was in full swing,¹⁶ Korean Communists had to re-assess the reliability of the ethnic Korean propertied classes as potential partners in anti-colonial struggle, and re-calibrate their rhetoric towards their most natural support basis, that is, the land-hungry peasantry. It is noteworthy, however, that the more modern faction of the Korean ruling class received somewhat better treatment than the landowners: the document specifically mentions that national (Korean capitalists-owned) industry was to develop freely, without the impediments the Japanese colonial administrators used to put on its way. As for capitalists’ wage labourers, the welfarist promises were kept basically on the same level as in the 1925-1926 documents (eight-hour working day for adults, six hours for minors, sickness and unemployment insurance paid by the employer, etc.) while it was also specified that ethnic Japanese and Western workers in Korea were to enjoy the same labour rights—and receive salaries equal to those of their Korean colleagues. In addition, the generally democratic and human rights-related part of the program was further augmented. It was added, for example, that the Party was in favour of abolishing all corporal punishment (Gang and Kajimura 1972, 133; Gim and Gim 1986, 3:265-66).

By mid-1928, however, a string of arrests by the Japanese police nearly paralyzed centralized Communist activities in Korea, already weakened by factional squabbles. Only in July 1928, around 170 Party members, including a good number of its leading cadres, were arrested (Gim and Gim 1986, 3:303-05). This, as well as the obvious inability of the existing Communist movement to perform its assumed role of the vanguard of mass anti-colonial struggles, led Comintern to rescind the acknowledgement of the Korean Communist Party as a local Comintern section. In its famed *December 1928 Resolution*, Comintern instructed its Korean followers to better penetrate both the workers’ and peasant associations and the existing legal organizations (even

16. On these events see, for example, Wu 1969.

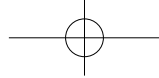


including the religious ones) and perform an utmost act of political rope-walking: to collaborate with the non-socialist national movements at the same time keeping their organizational and ideological integrity and doing their best to reveal the baselessness of reformist and other “bourgeois-democratic” illusions spread by nationalist leaders. While the dialectics of “pan-national alliance-cum-class struggle” where the trademark of Comintern’s line for the Communist struggle in the colonized countries since its very incipience, the *December 1928 Resolution* emphasizes the anti-bourgeois and anti-reformist militancy a way stronger than the earlier Comintern instructions, most likely under the influence of the failure of the “united front” between Nationalists and Communists in China. Concurrently, agrarian revolution was to be put forward and placed into the center of Communist agitation. The Communists were to propagate the welfarist reforms in cities and promotion of tenants’ rights (legal restrictions on tenancy rates etc.) in the countryside, while at the same time agitate for “full national independence and democratic dictatorship of proletariat and peasantry—workers’ and peasants’ Soviet government” (Shirinya and Wada 2007, 565-73).¹⁷

Thus, after having directed Korean Communists towards “national and democratic revolution first” throughout much of the 1920s, Comintern—radicalized by its failures in China—foregrounded again the slogan of “Korean Soviet government,” not seen since the early 1920s. What was the reaction of the Korean Communists? It looks as if the new radicalization was rather eagerly accepted. After all, by late 1929, the Great Depression set on, delivering a huge blow to Korea’s weak and dependent colonial economy and bringing steep growth in the number and scale of workers’ strikes and tenancy disputes (Bae 1987, 11-14). In such an atmosphere, the most radical solutions could easily appear as the most realistic ones. It has to be noticed, however, that, while following the Comintern line in general, Korean Communists were always struggling to nuance it, in accordance with their own understanding of their needs and priorities.

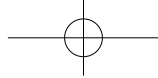
Good examples are the articles on Korean revolution’s current situation and tasks published by An Gwangcheon (1897-?), one of the leaders of

17. The original is to be found in the Russian State Archive of Social and Political History: РГАСПИ ф.495 оп.3 д.71 л. 137-49.



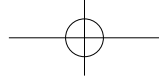
“ML” (Marxist-Leninist) group of Korean Communists—known for its increased theoretic sophistication and internationally oriented radicalism (Gim and Gim 1986, 3:247-49). In a longer article (published in Beijing-based journal, *Leninchueui*, Vol. 1, No. 1, May 1929), entitled “the Current Duties of the Korean Communists,” he followed the Comintern line in naming the overthrowing of Japanese imperialism and establishing not only a “fully independent, united national state,” but also “workers’ and peasants’ democratic regime” which would “confiscate large landholdings and distribute the land to the peasants,” as the main revolutionary task. At the same time, An thought such development possible only under certain conditions (“wide revolutionary uprising of the workers’ and peasant masses” etc.) and, moreover, clearly distinguished between proletarian dictatorship that the revolutionaries would struggle to build in post-revolutionary, independent Korea, and full-blown socialism. The road to the latter remained still long enough, even after the “proletarian masses” take power. On more practical level, An suggested the necessity of attracting intellectuals—many of them being of peasant origins—and petty bourgeoisie into the revolutionary camp, gathering the sympathies of the workers by foregrounding the practical demands (adoption of labour laws, introduction of workers’ welfare, eight-hour working days for adults, and six hours for minors) and struggling for tenancy rate reductions and tenancy right guarantees in the countryside (qtd. in Bae 1987, 65-131). The article strikes by its combination of enthusiastic radicalism with rather realistic attitudes concerning the necessity of broad anti-colonial alliances and emphasis on pragmatic demands which, although hardly realizable in late 1920s’ Korea, could attract the “masses” by the perspective of turning an impoverished colony into an advanced, democratic, and welfarist society.

Han Wigeon (1896-1937), a fellow “ML” militant, known as Marxist-Leninist theoretician and activist in both Korean and (since 1930) Chinese Communist parties, summarized, in his turn, his vision of the imminent tasks of Korean Communists in the article on Communists’ political program printed ca. half a year after An’s article (*Leninchueui*, Vol. 2, No.1, January 1930). The program makes it clear that Korea’s impending revolution would be a “bourgeois-democratic one,” but equally emphasizes, at the same time, its main characteristic as an agrarian revolution. After all, the land-hungry peasantry, together with urban proletariat, was going to become its main driving force. Mostly postponed to the further, socialist stage of the Korean revolution



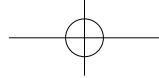
in the Communist programs of the mid-1920s, the great and thorough redistribution of land appeared forcefully in the programmatic Communist documents of 1929-1930. Since then, it continued to be the main Communist demand for the transitional period following the hoped-for restoration of Korea's independence. Since, in Han's analysis, Korean bourgeoisie was "extremely weak," mostly consisting of "landlords" diversifying themselves into urban investment, the power in post-independence Korea was to end up in the hands of "workers' and peasants' democratic dictatorship" which was to progress further towards genuinely socialist revolution, helped by the "existence of countries with proletarian dictatorship" (USSR is doubtlessly meant) and "the world proletarian revolutionary movement" in general. However, it has to be pointed out that Han's program envisioned the nationalization of only large, as well as Japanese-owned industries. Even a middle-sized private Korean enterprise was evidently to be tolerated, as long as the revolution did not develop further to its socialist stage. In a similar vein, only large landowners were to have their holdings confiscated and redistributed. This streak of realism—after all, urban petty bourgeoisie and rural owners-cultivators were needed as (junior) allies on the national-democratic stage of the revolution—was further complemented by Han's admonishment not to disregard workers' economical struggles. Communism was to be "the only theory taught to the workers" by Communist activists infiltrating the unions, but the unions were to "acquire [the allegiance of the] masses" by fighting for very concrete economical, quotidian gains (Suh 1970, 156-67). This combination of a rather radical vision of post-independence future—with the agrarian reforms at its centre—with meticulous attention towards the mundane life of the "masses" Communists had to recruit into the ranks of their followers, was to become a distinctive feature of the Communist programmatic documents throughout the early 1930s.

As the Korean Communist Party was to be rebuilt through workplace organization, workers' recruitment and establishment of primary, factory-based cells first, the typical domestic Korean Communist activist of the early and mid-1930s was a grassroots organizer, sometimes without any direct connections to Moscow, émigré Communist groups, or with the connections of rather episodic kind. A typical example of such a homegrown militant was Yi Jaeyu (1905-1944), whose group succeeded in establishing several dozens of factory and school cells in Seoul and its vicinities (one of them in Keijō Imperial University, where Yi collaborated with a Japanese Communist, professor



Miyake Shikanosuke, 1898-1982) and in leading several important workers' strikes and student protests' between 1932 and 1936 (when Yi was arrested for the last time, to die incarcerated eight years after). While in prison, Yi wrote a very detailed article on Korea's socio-political situation and Communist movement perspectives, "The Particularities of the Communist Movement in Korea and the Question of its Development" (published, ironically, in the Japanese police journal, *Shisō ihō*, Vol. 11, June 1937). A brilliant organizer and polemist, Yi justified his thesis—according to which the national-democratic revolution in Korea was to be led by a proletarian/peasant block, rather than the Korean bourgeoisie—by the experiences of the March First movement of 1919, when its propertied leaders did not manage to radicalize the movement by foregrounding the land reform slogans, did not even try to build a lasting grassroots anti-colonial organization and, in most cases, ended up by eventually betraying the Korean nation and turning into pro-Japanese activists. In the end, "workers' and peasants' masses" were to achieve Korea's independence, establish a Soviet government, and conduct the land reform and nationalization. They were, however, to confiscate only large estates and industrial facilities. Importantly, the new Korean Soviet government was to grant the workers seven-hour working day (with one more extra hour presumably reserved for lunch) and other "improvements in their situation." While this plan appears basically like a continuation of An Gwangcheon and Han Wigeon's visions of 1929-1930, Yi's article offers remarkably elaborate evidence of what he himself termed the "abnormalities" of colonial modernity. In Yi's view, Korea was a source of surplus profits for mostly Japanese capitalism and a captive market for Japanese-made goods, artificially kept away from educational and ideological progress. Yi cites, for example, the Japanese support for Confucian establishments and colonial government-controlled shamanic associations as examples of deliberate obscurantist policy. Factory girls, often underage, contracted by their families for six to ten years of virtual indentured slavery at both Japanese and Korean-owned textile factories, receiving 10 to 18 yen a month—a pittance hardly enough to subsist—for 18-19-hour working days and regularly beaten in factories and prison-like dormitories, were the crown example of "semi-feudal capitalism's" evils which the "revolutionary masses" were to clean up (Sin 1989, 73-88).

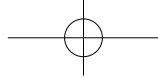
However, the abolition of indentured slavery and "feudal" mistreatment was only one of the many practical slogans Yi Jaeyu used in his propaganda work as an underground union organizer. Other slogans—known from Yi



Jaeyu's interrogation records by Japanese prosecutors' (1937)—included not only the seven-hour working day (with one hour for lunch and 40-hour working weeks), minimum wage for married male workers, equal wage for the same labour and freedom of workers' organization and action, including unionization by industry, but even the freedom of organizing workers' factory committees for eventual control over the production process, and workers' self-defense units. Such freedoms definitely required a radical ("proletarian-peasant") alliance, rather than an ordinary parliamentary government, taking power—or, at least, exerting predominant political influence—in post-independence Korea. The slogans used by Yi and his associates in their work with students were even more detailed. They numbered more than sixty in total. Some of them—for example, the establishment of students' self-defense units—would clearly be realizable only under rather radical post-revolutionary regime, or as a part of a revolutionary process. The majority of the demands, however, could be classified as generally democratic in nature. They included, for example, the disbandment of "militarist and statist nationalist organizations" (including the associations of retired servicemen and Patriotic Women Association; noticeably, Girl and Boy Scouts were also defined as "reactionary organizations," to be disbanded), as well as abolishment of mandatory class attendance and militarized calisthenics exercises, democratization of teachers' appointment and dismissal process (with student deputies sitting together on the appointment and dismissal committees), liberalization of disciplinarian regimentation in the dormitories and improvements in dormitory dwellers' diet, and, obviously quite importantly, prohibition on the use of "domineering, repressive, abusive, and bureaucratic language" by the teachers vis-à-vis their students. The schools were to be liberated from bureaucratic micro-management by the educational bureaucrats on the outside, and cleansed from the inside through "routine memorization-based educational methods." While the Communist student activists supervised by Yi Jaeyu's underground circle were to urge the students to develop solidarity with "Japanese student movement," as well as "Chinese Soviets," "victims of special repression" in colonized Taiwan and even "Mongolian and Tibetan (?) partisans," most of the slogans dealt with the problems Korean students encountered in their everyday life, and encompassed both the eventual aims of the radical democratization of educational sector and some of practical imminent demands (for example, fifty percent tuition fee reduction) (qtd. in Kim 2007, 75-76; 101-06).

The basic platform established by such Communist theoreticians as An Gwangcheon and Han Wigeon and used in practical organization and propaganda by such prominent, Seoul-based militants as Yi Jaeyu, was largely shared by regional grassroots Communist activists as well. Some of them, as a matter of fact, went even further in elaborating their practical—economic and social—demands, attempting to do their best to articulate the democratic visions potentially popular among their audiences. For example, the program worked out in 1933 by Yi Gitaek (1904-?), a Communist activist who participated in the Korean Communist movement in Japan in the late 1920s together with Yi Jaeyu and later led the South Jeolla League for Korean Communist Party Re-establishment (he and his comrades were apprehended by the Japanese police in 1934), featured “Soviet republic of Korean workers and peasants” coming out of the “anti-imperialist revolution,” as “complete independence for Korea” would be acquired. “Korean Soviet government” was to confiscate the industries and landholdings owned by “Japanese imperialists,” as well as the holdings by “other parasitic landowners.” However, the “petty bourgeoisie,” described as an ally of workers and peasants in the coming revolution, was obviously to be allowed to keep its property. At least, its confiscations were not mentioned. To lead the “masses” to the revolution, an array of practical demands was elaborated, which, in the case of the workers, included abolition of “semi-slave labour conditions,” “slavery labour contract system,” oppressive “dormitory system,” and the overexploitation of “women, youth, and Chinese workers.” In addition, Communists demanded eight-hour working days for adults, six hours for those between 16 and 18, and four hours for those under 16, together with a two-week paid summer holiday per year, minimum wage for married workers, maternity benefits, and establishment of unemployment, sickness and old-age insurance at the expense of factory owners, but under the control of the labour unions. The welfarist model was supposed to spread further to the countryside as well: free, centralized distribution of farm fertilizer and seeds, together with free rental of all farm equipment—and even subsidies to the peasants affected by the price slumps—were the next set of demands (Suh 1970, 171-76).

In the neighbouring province, North Jeolla, a group of Communist militants, led by Gim Cheolchu (1908-?), developed a similar platform for Party re-establishment from below, also in the early 1930s (Gim received his prison sentence in 1934). Their program as well envisioned independent Korea with a “proletarian government” guaranteeing land for the peasants, eight-hour



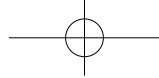
working days for the workers, social security for everybody, and all thinkable freedoms (speech, association, publication, etc.), as well as “open courts and hearings” in the judiciary. The workers were directed to struggle for—*inter alia*—special wage rates for night shifts, prohibition of night labour for youth, abolition of the labour of minors (under 16) and senior citizens (above 45), and, interestingly, full freedom of entering the Japanese labour market for all the Korean workers. The North Jeolla programme distinguishes itself by having a special category of social policy demands, which included not only free medical treatment for all citizens, tuition-free compulsory education, state-run homes for the aged and orphanages, introduction of trials by popularly elected grand juries, and abolition of (state-licensed) prostitution and state confiscations (and forced purchases at administratively set prices) of private land, but even state guarantees of livelihood for released political prisoners (Suh 1970, 177-98)! The demands were to paint an ideal picture of the sort of alternative modernity—with a thoroughly democratic and welfarist state in its centre—the colonial underdogs could be interested in waging a protracted, bitter struggle for.

Yet another important addition to the typified Communist vision of post-revolutionary future is to be found in the *Platform of Action of the Communist Party of Korea*—a document published originally in English in a Comintern journal, *International Press Correspondence*, in 1934, and signed by an otherwise largely obscure grouping, “the Initiatory Group,” which most likely consisted of a Korean Comintern cadre, Choe Seongu (1898-1937)—a Russified ethnic Korean from Maritime Province, who taught at the Communist University of the Toilers of Orient in the early 1930s and was executed on November 22, 1937 amidst Stalin’s Great Purges as a “Japanese spy” (Song 2013, 292)—and some of his Moscow-based Korean colleagues. In 1934-1935, Choe wrote a number of articles in Russian for the Comintern press, interpreting the content of the *Platform* (Im 1985, 382-82). As such, the *Platform* is perhaps the most inclusive programmatic document the Korean Communist movement of the 1920s-1930s ever produced, evidently written on the basis of the existing platforms. The *Platform* features, expectedly, the “proletarian and peasant Soviet government,” land redistribution, and introduction of fully developed welfare state in post-revolutionary Korea; however, it also promotes a set of exhausting, well-articulated concrete demands, which give an impression of a “scientific,” well thought-over plan for a complete reconstruction of the Korean life. For example, minimum wage and social insurance payments were to be

calculated on the basis of minimal life cost statistics. In the present, the Korean workers were instructed to fight for the provision of clean dining rooms, free annual supply of overalls, and building of the factory housing for the workers under the control of the workers' committees. The novelty was a special set of demands for urban petty bourgeoisie and handicraftsmen, who were promised full annulment of all money-lenders' debts and streamlining of taxation into a single, progressive tax (qtd. in Suh 1970, 326-50). The Communists were in need of allies, and while richer capitalists were judged to be too thoroughly co-opted by the colonial administration, the smaller ones were supposed to eventually join the pan-national anti-colonial struggle.

As is well known, the re-establishment of the Korean Communist Party—for which so many Communist militants had been struggling since 1928—never took place until 1945; by that time, Comintern (disbanded by Stalin's decree in 1943) was a history. Still, the visions of national revolution and post-revolutionary future, elaborated in the platforms produced by émigré activists (An Gwangcheon, Han Wigeon, and Choe Seongu) as well as domestic underground militants (Yi Jaeyu, Yi Gitaek, Gim Cheolju, etc.), played a significant role for the future development of Korea's political history. As is generally recognized by the scholars, Gyeongseong Communist Group (Komgeurup, 1939-1941)—one of the few underground Communist groups which succeeded in surviving for at least some years in the atmosphere of the war-time police terror—largely operated on the basis of the pre-existing Communist programs and platforms of the 1930s. Its activists hoped to establish a “people's democracy” after a successful revolution and then realize the peasants' wish to acquire landowners' land and urban workers' desire for improved labour protection and establishment of welfare institutions (Sin 2005, 143-74).

“People's democracy” again became the main slogan of the re-constituted Korean Communist Party (in November 1946, its Southern branch merged with several other socialist parties into Worker's Party of South Korea), as well as its main political ally, the Pan-National Council of the Korean Trade Unions (Jeonpyeong)—which was largely led by Communist worker militants from the colonial era. Its chairman, Heo Seongtaek (1908-?), a labour organizer from North Hamgyeong Province, studied in Moscow at the Comintern-run Communist University of the Toilers of Orient and even attended the Comintern's Seventh Congress in 1935 (Gang and Seong 1996, 538). Post-



liberation Communists wanted workers, peasants, and their allies (including even some “conscientious capitalists”) to assume “hegemony” in the government of the hoped-for “new Korea,” so that labour unions at the workplace would have a stake in running the nationalized large industries, and peasants acquire the land confiscated from the landlords. By the end of 1948, however, both Communists and Communist-allied unions were outlawed in the southern part of divided Korea (An 2000).

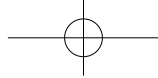
Nevertheless, many of the “democratic reforms” conducted by the pre-Korean War North Korean regime, largely followed the scripts and scenarios developed by the colonial-era Communist movement. The March 1946 land reform was the most important one among them. It is true, as we will see below, that the blueprints for it were produced by the Soviet patrons of the new government. However, as Charles Armstrong (2003, 78-80) persuasively argues, the development of such blueprints and their implementation on the ground were possible only as much as the idea of the radical land re-distribution and other “democratic reforms” already struck roots inside the leftist political camp in Korea. Indeed, Russian historians also acknowledge that the Soviet military administration in North Korea made a radical land reform into its priority precisely because it was obvious that such a reform was strongly demanded by the activists on the ground and by Soviet’s local collaborators, Gim Ilseong (Kim Il Sung, 1912-1994) included, inside the incipient governance organs of the Soviet occupation zone (Vanin 2016, 106-07). Indeed, by March 1946, the Soviets prepared two different blueprints for the land reform in North Korea. One, which originated inside the Soviet Foreign Ministry, was less radical in that it envisioned the peasant beneficiaries of the reform compensating the value of the landlords’ land they receive, during a longer period of time (15 to 25 years). Another, prepared by the Soviet occupation authorities on the ground, included a more radical clause requiring full confiscation and redistribution of landlords’ excess land (over five hectares per household) without any compensation. In the end, it was preferred under the weight of Korean activists’ requests and expectations (Vanin 2016, 107-13), largely formed by the programmatic requests of the colonial-era Communist movement. At the same time, the de facto provisional government for the northern, Soviet-occupied part of Korea, Provisional People’s Committee for North Korea, reconfirmed by its decree in October 1946 that the private property of small and middle-scale Korean capitalists was to be secured from any confiscations for the time being (Vanin

2016, 114-15). Thus, yet another programmatic demand from the colonial age, namely the development of productive capacities in a (temporary) alliance with small and middle-scale local bourgeoisie, was fulfilled.

Other “democratic reforms” were also of no negligible significance. The eight-hour working day, together with child labour prohibition and the rule of equal pay for equal work, were legalized in June 1946. Gender equality was established by law in July 1946; then followed the nationalization of main transport means, banks, and postal services in August of the same year. Importantly, mandatory primary school education was introduced in September 1949 (although it only came into practice in 1956, after the end of the 1950-53 Korean War). A rapid and massive “illiteracy liquidation” campaign helped to teach ca. 98 percent of the formerly illiterate adult citizens read and write by the end of 1948. Cheaper prices for medical services were legislated in 1947 as a prelude to the introduction of free medicine in 1952 (Joseon jungang tonginsin 1949, 135). The “democratic reforms”—made possible under the Soviet protection and influence—largely followed the visions of the future already proclaimed under the colonial rule by the Korean Communist movement pioneers. The legal implementation of these visions was an important factor in cementing the popular basis for the new regime in the northern part of Korea.

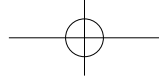
The visions of “progressive democracy” foregrounded in the immediate post-Liberation period, largely disappeared into oblivion as North Korea developed a rigid and personalized vertical of power underpinned by the new *juche* (self-reliance) ideology in the 1960s and 1970s. Still, the importance of the colonial-period Communist projects of the future for the post-Liberation Sovietization of Northern Korea was even remembered on the official level. Article 13 of “Socialist Labour Law” of April 1978 made it clear that “the socialist labour policies of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea implement the revolutionary programmatic points on labour issues originally put forward during the glorious times of the revolutionary anti-Japanese resistance” (Beopjecheo 1991, 475).¹⁸ Despite all the political changes since the post-Liberation age, the memory of the colonial-era origins of the “democratic reforms” still lived on.

18. The text of the “Socialist Labour Law” is accessible online, for example, at: <https://news.kotra.or.kr/pdfView/nationInfo/nationItem/101131/232/233.html> (accessed May 8, 2017).



In Place of a Conclusion

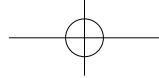
To conclude, Korean Communist movement's visions of the future evolved together with the movement itself throughout the 1920s-1930s. While the earliest articulations of these visions, dating back to the early 1920s, saw the coming Korean revolution as a socialist one akin to the Russian October 1917 Revolution, the Communist programs from mid- and late 1920s specified that the first stage of the Korean revolution was to be national liberation coupled with a thorough democratization of the society. Appealing visions of a democratic, emancipatory modern society—something the colonial subjects living in a highly regimented police state without even rudimentary human right protection could only dream about—were spelled out in great detail in the platforms and slogan collections by the Communist militants, especially in the 1930s. They included, for example, something as unimaginable in the colonial settings as non-authoritarian schools free from rote memorization and disciplinarian regime—a trait of emancipatory modernity neither South nor North Korea succeeded in achieving so far. To implement “democratic reforms” of such depth, all the Communist platforms since 1929 envisioned that “people’s democracy,” or “workers’ and peasants’ government” would take power in post-liberation Korea, in alliance with a number of potentially anti-colonial forces including even small- and middle-scale Korean capitalists. The “people’s democratic government” was to nationalize large and/or Japanese-owned industries and re-distribute large and/or Japanese-owned land-holdings, sparing, however, the possessions of small or middle-sized Korean land owners. Then, it was to run an essentially market-based economy (a switch to fully centrally planned economy was never mentioned in any of the Communist programs surveyed for this presentation) with strong elements of welfarist policies and benign labour laws, seemingly modelled upon the New Economic Policies (NEP) in 1920s USSR. Communists played both nationalist and internationalist cards: on the one hand, it was presumed in their programs that both Chinese and Japanese (and even Western) workers were welcomed to stay on in “people’s Korea,” on the other hand, all programs emphasize the need to switch the language of official communications and education from Japanese to Korean immediately on having achieved independence (typically, see Suh 1970, 340). The Communist platform on “national culture,” adopted in post-Liberation Korea in March 1946, emphasized both “continuation of old culture’s



strong points” together with “expression of our ethno-nation’s particularity” and “critical appropriation of the foreign progressive culture” (qtd. in Sin and Han 2015, 483). Communist programs represented a potentially winning combination of social radicalism (land reform, implementation of universal free medical care and pension system, etc.), politically inclusive attitudes (emphasis on alliance with petty bourgeois layers etc.), economical pragmatism (the vision of “social market economy” on the first stage of the development rather than central planning system, hardly suitable for a largely agrarian society), and democratic, libertarian modernism (demands to democratize workplaces and schools etc.) which was calculated to achieve maximal popular approval among Communists’ target audiences. Such a program—bold, extremely detailed and fine-tuned to the modern and liberational expectations of broad layers of public—was one of the strengths of the Communist movement. Not unlike the pre-revolutionary Bolshevik platform in Russia, it also assumedly played an important role in winning relatively strong popular allegiance to the leftist cause, both before and after 1945.

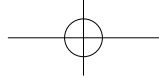
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LIM Kyoung-hwa (limkyounghwa0725@gmail.com), born in Seoul, South Korea, in 1971 and educated at Korea University in Seoul (BA, 1994) and Tokyo National University (MA, 1998 and PhD, 2002), worked for diverse universities in South Korea (Sungkyunkwan University, Inha University, etc.) and is currently affiliated with Yonsei University’s Institute for Korean Studies. Initially a scholar of Japan’s ancient poetry, Lim subsequently expanded into other fields, having been working on the history of the Korean diasporas, particularly in the USSR and Japan, history of modern sonic culture in Korea and Japan, and diasporic cultural movement, including the national culture movement by Maritime Province Korean residents, historically closely associated with the Korean Communist movement. She has also been researching the post-war relationship between Okinawans and Japan-based zainichi Koreans. In the present article, Tikhonov and Lim attempt to make clear that “Communism,” while definitely being the ultimate aim of colonial-age Korean Communists, does not provide a full description of the objectives of the Communist movement. Rather than being utopia followers, Communists operated with both maximal and minimal programs; the latter aimed both at Korea’s national independence and a thorough democratization of the Korean society.

Abstract

The evolution of the Communist programs in colonial-era Korea went through several stages. The first Communist groups of the early 1920s were keen to emphasize that their revolution aims at Communizing Korea as a part of the world revolution project initiated by Russian Bolsheviks, although such Communist groups as the “Shanghai” Communist Party were in reality more nationalist than socialist in orientation. Then, the underground Korean Communist Party, founded in April 1925, following the current Comintern theories, defined Korea’s coming revolution as “bourgeois-democratic” in character, and stronger emphasized the importance of united front struggle together with the more radical nationalists. Changing Comintern line and general radicalization brought by the Great Depression led Korean Communists of the later 1920s-earlier 1930s to revise their programs and accentuate the mobilization of broad social strata to the anti-colonial struggle, rather than alliance with nationalists. The post-colonial political system was redefined as a “people’s democracy.” The “agrarian revolution”—land redistribution—was emphasized as its main project. After 1936, the Communists switched back to the united front strategy, but “agrarian revolution” retained a prominent place in their programmes. These programmes, with their visions of democratized new nation state, played a role in forming the Left’s visions after Korea’s liberation in 1945.

Keywords: Communism, colonial Korea, program, Comintern