Inhabiting Local Contradictions, Engaging Global Mandates:In-Hun Choi and Sok-Yong Hwang in the Landscape of Contemporary Korean Fiction Writing

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Abstract This article examines the oeuvres of In-Hun Choi and Sok-Yong Hwang, the two magnates in contemporary Korean fiction writing through the lens of the local, national, and global intersections by juxtaposing various political and historical contexts with their formal innovations. By explicating a space wherein a contingent local configuration appears in relation to multiple identifications in a larger context, I put forth an argument that Choi and Hwang chart a vexed but counterhegemonic space to illustrate what "inhabiting local contradictions" and "engaging global mandates" simultaneously entail.
Key words In-Hun Choi; Sok-Yong Hwang; Korean novelists; local; global

I. Introduction: National Allegories and Global Imaginaries

My aim to introduce two magnates in contemporary Korean fiction writing, In-Hun Choi (崔仁勳) and Sok-Yong Hwang (黃晳暎) in this article is not an attempt to make any inclusiveness in my selection of the two novelists that is meant to render obsolete any possible alternative lists of such a kind. Rather, it is settled on primarily for the range of concerns it is most likely to demonstrate about the development of Korean fiction writing to provide compelling entries into the issues which the act of reading the two prominent Korean novelists' oeuvre brings to light. As a point of departure, I will demonstrate how to locate Choi and Hwang against the backdrop of the turbulence and complexities of modern Korean history deeply embedded within global power dynamics, particularly after the liberation from the Japanese colonial rule (1910-45), the ensuing national division, the Korean War (1950-53), and a long period of dictatorial regime of Park Chung-Hee (1961-79) alongside the rapid

industrial growth and Korean masses' struggle for democratization.

Since the post-liberation period, Koreans have been confronted with a double task—"to recover national sovereignty" and, simultaneously, "to build a new nation" (Kim 4). In tandem with such a nation-building effort, what is most notable in the emergence and development of modern Korean literature are conflicting bids to define Korean "national," if not downright "nationalist," literature. The definition is *always already* inextricably linked with an ever-renewed recognition and negotiation of Koreans' national predicaments in the wake of the shared experience of colonization and the partitioning of the Korean peninsula as long as it remains as the last site of Cold War politics and an intersection of the political maneuvers of world powers. It is precisely in this context that modern Korean literature even into this 21st century can be read as a "national allegory" in Fredric Jameson's words in the sense that the personal in Korean literature is "to be read in primarily political and social terms" (72) whereas the personal and the political cannot be reconciled mainly due to an epistemic fracture between the two in the First World.[1]

Regardless of whether or not concurring with Jameson's arguments in his controversial article, "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," I do not need to reiterate here the long genealogy of debates, particularly revolving around the problematic nature of the term "Third World" and the essentialist vein in his broad use of the term by defining the Third World "purely in terms of an 'experience' of externally inserted phenomena" (Ahmad 6). Instead, what I would like to emphasize is that Jameson's critical angle provides an entrée into an enabling counter-reading of Korean contemporary fiction writing to reconsider its complexity and bring into sharp relief the metropole's control over the representation of the periphery. It is important to stress this dialectical relation between the metropole and the Korean Peninsula.

A blueprint for outlining the First World as private versus public and the Third World as allegorical is likely to reproduce a developmental discourse in which the Third World is supposed to occupy a backward place not yet sufficiently established to allow for the creative spirit of the subject to come up with its own voice without resorting to the public, the communal, and the national.[2] The Third-World subject thereby ends up only as *l'ecrivain engagé* who may be discouraged from writing in less overtly politico-allegorical styles and, as a result, the cultural production of the Third World is defined as not yet mature. To illustrate the unconscious ways in which these allegorical expectations are enacted, it is urgent to note that it is always the First World that has an investment in reconsolidating the Third World association with allegory to secure its own first-world representational superiority.

Given such problematic nature of national allegories and taking issue with

Jameson's claim that "*the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society*" (69, emphasis in original), I consider it more productive to build upon and extend Jameson's argument by surveying contemporary Korean fiction writing through the lens of its local, national, global intersections in order to interrogate the nature of national allegories themselves, their political implications, and their social functions in Korean literature. Recognizing such a double trajectory of modern Korean literature within the framework of "the national within the global" helps one understand the ways in which Korean contemporary novelists inhabit local contradictions and engage global mandates. This is the first step one has to take to locate In-Hun Choi and Sok-Yong Hwang in the landscape of contemporary Korean fiction writing.

II. In-Hun Choi: Beyond the Binary of Open Square and Private Room

In-Hun Choi (1936 ~) has brought a new trend to the landscape of Korean literature in the 1960s by establishing a new tradition of intellectual novels alongside his innovation of literary techniques and experiment with various narrative forms. His novels heralds a break with the Korean literature of the preceding chapter which was preoccupied, if not obsessed, with the chaos and moral collapse after the independence from the Japanese colonial rule in 1945, subsequent national division, and the Korean War. Choi, a novelist of ideas, however, has never remained in the realm of metaphysics. Instead, he seeks to mediate tensions between individual freedom and the burden of history by exploring both inward realities of human psychology and concrete, social contexts.

Choi was born in a well-to-do merchant family in a northern region of Korea under the rule of Japanese colonialism. When the communist government supported by the Soviet Union began to wield its power after the independence, his "bourgeoisie" family, branded as "an enemy of the people," was forced to move, ending up in a refugee camp in South Korea. This experience of displacement from his native soil and his keen awareness of his country's tragic history deeply embroiled in the political maneuvers of world powers after World War Two profoundly affected his literary imagination.

At age 24, Choi gained instant recognition with the publication of *The Open Square* (1960). What the "open square" in the title signifies is a kind of "open space" where solidarity and collectivity prevail as a historical momentum. In contrast to the "square," Chois presents another space, a "private room," where individuals, drawing back a few steps from a tumultuous crowd in the square, pursue freedom and happiness. Pitting these two disparate spaces against each other, Choi subtly casts doubts on the conflicting ideologies of the two Koreas. The protagonist, Myungjun Yi,

is a Hamlet-like, sensitive college student caught between the "square" and the "private room." Amid the political upheaval and ideological clash after the partitioning of the Korean peninsula, Yi is disappointed with the social milieu of the South and decides to go to the North. To his dismay, what he finds in the North is a square overflowing with meaningless political slogans and propagandas. While serving in the North Korean army during the Korean War, he is captured and held at a prison camp. In the POW negotiations after the war, he chooses to go to a neutral country, India. It is not clear whether or not Yi finally finds a third place to transcend the binary of the square and the private room since Choi ends the novel with his protagonist jumping into the sea on his voyage to India. However, *The Square* provides avenues to reinterpret the national division and ideological conflicts from a new perspective, thereby prophetically prefiguring a brief utopian moment envisioned in the Civil Uprising of April 19 in 1960 (the April Revolution) and the shattering of the dream by the Military Coup D'état of May 16 in 1961.[3]

> Through this novel, which criticized the ideological stance of South Korea as well as that of North Korea, one can grasp the historical meaning of the Civil Uprising of April 19, 1960. Seen from the historical viewpoint, the Civil Uprising of April 19, 1960 was an eruption of the people's will to freedom. As implied by fact that Yi, the hero of *The Open Square*, was forced to commit suicide, however, freedom was yet no more than a dream to come true. Indeed, through the Civil Uprising of April 19, 1960 was an event of enormous historical meaning, it was not a successful course of event, the sense of frustration and despair came to grip the mind of Korean people. In a sense, the Korean literature of the 1960s was a series of writers' (and people's) attempts to face and counter this sense of frustration and despair. (Kim 9-10)

A unifying characteristic that underlies Choi's earlier novels is his examination of individuals' interior world. Choi opens up a space to investigate his characters' innermost consciousness by reducing narrative time frame. The actual events in *The Open Square* take place in a day when Yi is on a voyage to India and the story of his life around the Korean War is narrated retrospectively in the form of the character's memory. *Dream of Nine Clouds* (1962) treats an hour's nightmare and death of a character. *A Journey to the Western Countries* (1966) transforms a brief moment of going down from the second floor to the first into a fantastic journey to the city of W and the Sokwang Temple in North Korea. *The Daily Life of Ku-poh the Novelist* (1972), as noted by the title itself, also reflects Choi's interest in the compression of time. Evoking modernist novelists in the early twentieth century, particularly James

Joyce, this exploration into individuals' interior worlds added a new dimension to the modernity of Korean literature.

The turn to inner realities demands new narrative forms and techniques. "Life of Nolbu" (1966) and "Life of Ongojip" (1969) illustrate the ways in which Choi creatively engages and revises a Korean folklore tradition. In "The Voice of the Governor-General" (1967), Choi comes up with nuanced commentaries on the political situation of Korea by employing an imaginary historical period in the form of allegory. *The Daily Life of Ku-poh the Novelist* is a rewriting and reinventing of Taewon Park's novel already published several decades ago. Finally, his unflagging efforts to search new narrative forms led him to completely abandon fiction writing and to dedicate himself to writing plays.

After publishing critically acclaimed dramas such as *Moon Moon Bright Moon* and *Away, Away, Long Long Time Ago* in the 1970s, Choi returned to novel writing with *The Topic* in 1993. The meaning of the title is a subject for meditation in Buddhism. The "topic" Choi poses to himself in this novel is how to locate an individual's destiny not only in a national context but also from a larger, global perspective. Choi even attempts to transcend the genre of fiction itself by combining fiction, poetry, drama, essay, and criticism in *The Topic*. Based upon his childhood memories in North Korea, a stay in the United States in the 1970s, and a trip to Russia in the early 1990s, Choi embarks on an Odyssean voyage to the twentieth-century world history. Both in the United States, the very heartland of capitalism and in Russia which was once the center of communism, the narrator "I" as a persona of the author feels himself a refugee just as Choi (and his character Yi in *The Open Square*) does in his partitioned country.

Delineating how the destiny of Choi himself, his family, and his country bears the imprint of the world history, Choi broadens the parameters of national literature. Furthermore, challenging conventional patterns of historical and autobiographical writing, the novel gives accounts of a number of monumental moments in history that exist only in fragments, thereby confounding rather than confirming the narrator's privileged status as an "original." Choi's doubt as to an official history in parallel with his experiment with diverse narrative forms is bound up with the untold stories of colonization, displacement, and the incessantly disrupted attempt of retrieving forgotten memories. It is precisely in this fashion that Choi puts readers in a conversation with the narrator over a "topic" rather than merely reclaims or recovers history itself. He never translates or explains but leaves readers continuously pondering over the intended meanings of a "topic." This strategy ironically brings home to readers how the Korean people's voice has been silenced in the name of writing a "universal history." Through fragmented stories and fuzzy sketches of

historical events, Choi is enabled to articulate effectively the fact that the history of Korean silence ironically can be transformed into a space wherein a repressed voice can be heard.

It is at this point that his life-long struggle with the divide of an open square and a private room, and his central themes of separation and displacement meet up with his surreptitious desire for reunification and recovery. At the same time, Choi's thematically and structurally well-crafted narrative provides a reminder of difficulty undercutting such a utopian vision of bridging the two conflicting desires. *The Topic* can be thus considered a landmark novel ever written in Korean serving as a doorway to world history.

III. Sok-Yong Hwang: Inviting Uninvited Guests

Leading his life as a migrant laborer, social activist, Vietnam War veteran, and political exile besides his career as a prolific novelist, Sok-Yong Hwang has undauntedly confronted the history of modern Korea through the lens of his probing realism with deep compassion for the socially underrepresented and marginalized people. Critically acclaimed and gaining worldwide attention, his novels have been translated in several languages. Hwang not only pinpoints crucial moments in modern Korean history in his novels but also persistently delves into the roots of social contradictions of Korean society—forcibly transplanted Western cultures since the late nineteenth century, thirty-five years of Japanese colonial rule, the partitioning of the Korean peninsula, and the political struggle in present-day Korea as a continuation of the larger dynamics of the Cold War.

Hwang's early novels vividly depict uprooted and isolated lives of lower and working class masses in the 1970s, when South Korea was engrossed in industrialization and modernization. As "a literary reaction to the industrialized society that was achieved during the 1970s" (Kim 12), *Strange Land* (1971) and *The Road to Sampo* (1973) squarely deal with the increasing distinction of classes amid the rapid economic development when the victimization of the people excluded from the process of growth was a taboo for writers under the dictatorial leadership of that era. Through his portrayal of migrant laborers drifting from one place to another in the two novels and the poverty-stricken life of the poor living on the outskirts of a city in *A Dream of Good Fortune* (1973), Hwang revealed the other side of the economic growth and development of the era—a wretched condition of uprootedness sweeping over the whole country. Alongside his critique of the nationalist rhetoric of industrial development, Hwang delicately wove his belief in the life-force of the lower, working class people into his gritty portrayal of the people's suffering and tribulation when "the 'big push' that created Korean's big firms, now known by their names or logos all

over the world" was domineering over Koreans (Cumings 323).

Despite his consistent interest in everyday life of the masses and social problems, Hwang hardly remains within the confines of realism and social engagement. He continues to adopt different narrative techniques and place his novels in a variety of spatiotemporal settings to gain more comprehensive and critical perspectives on the "now" and "here" contexts of Korea. In his multi-volume saga *Jang Gilsan*, originally published in serial form in a newspaper between 1974 and 1984, Hwang made a subtle charge against the politically oppressive situation of Korean society in the form of a historical novel. Displaying Hwang's mastery of rich vernacular expressivity and ingenious reinvention of folklore tradition, *Jang Gilsan* captures both the actual conditions of the oppressed and their indomitable spirit of resistance against the ruling class through the life of the Robin-Hood-like title character in the late seventeenth century. *The Shadow of Arms* (1987) reflects Hwang's Vietnam War experience, in which he served as a Korean marine. At the heart of this first Korean novel about the Vietnam War are Hwang's scathing comments on the intervention of Western powers in Vietnam and his remorse for his country's complicity in the "dirty" war. Drawing a parallel between the history of Korea and that of Vietnam, *The Shadow of Arms* prefigures Hwang's broadening range of vision and global outlook in his recent novels.

The most formative event in Hwang's career as a writer is his 1989 visit to North Korea. This "unauthorized" visit resulted in his exile in Germany, his arrest and five-year imprisonment. Released in 1998, he published *An Old Garden* (2000) and *The Guest* (2001). As a revised version of the "Sampo" in *The Road to Sampo*, which is not so much a geographical location but a place densely fraught with ideological investments of the 1970s, a "garden" is sought out in *An Old Garden* to bridge the gap between the haunting past and an uncertain future after Hwang witnessed the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the Soviet Union. *An Old Garden* treats the turbulent political events in South Korea in the 1980s through the prism of the years right before a new millennium. The beginning of the 1980s in Korea is marked by the Kwangju Uprising, later redefined as a "Democratization Movement" (May 1980).[4] A military group seized power through a coup d'état and crushed the people's demand for democratization by ruthlessly killing hundreds of civilians in Kwangju.

The main character of *An Old Garden* is a student activist who dedicates himself to the democratization of his country in that era. When he is released from the eighteen years' imprisonment, what awaits him are enervated "fighters" of the 1980s now disillusioned with their own utopian dreams and a still vague outlook for the future. The anguish of disillusionment predominant in the novel is symbolized by the death of his lover, who supported his political activism with selfless devotion. Only a

diary she left and their 18-year-old daughter bear the marks of her traces. Ending the novel with the main character waiting to see his daughter he has never seen before, Hwang poses a question of what should be done now and how to grope for a way to come to terms with both the achievement and limitation of the generation who strived to realize their utopian visions.

The Guest revolves around the massacre in Sincheon, Hwanghae Province in North Korea during the Korean War. Based upon Hwang's research and interviews during his stay in present-day North Korea, the novel discloses through mosaic-like multiple points of view the secret that innocent people were killed by Christians rather than by the U.S. army as the North Korean authorities propagate. Defining the enforced modernity on his country such as Marxism and Christianity as "guests," Hwang seeks to resolve the enmity in the Korean Peninsula—the last site still teeming with the contradictions of the Cold War politics. *The Guest* ends with Reverend Ruy's visit to North Korea, who settled in the United States after the war. Describing Reverend Ryu performing a shamanistic ritual for the dead in the final page, Hwang implies that he will continue to grapple with the social and historical issues in and about the Korean Peninsula by playing a role of "shaman" through his literary creation.

> A long line of people, hunched over at the waist, all move in one direction. They look as if they are each dragging something extremely heavy behind them. The endless parade has no visible beginning or end. A winding path passes through the field, leading up into a faraway lavender mountain ridge. They do not speak. From here, only their backs are visible. […]
>
> Like a bird, he soars up and over the scene. Below him a series of hill and a thin stream race by. He hears the cows moo in the distance and hears the hens cackle as they lay their eggs. He hears the people in the paddies, singing as they plant next year's rice crop. The fast beating of drums is superimposed on the buoyant, metallic sound of cymbals. He hears the mother call to her children.
>
> Kids, time to eat. (231-32)

When Ryu digs a hole in the ground and places a piece of his brother's bone in it, it becomes an archeological act of excavating a site of past. It is also an act of "re-membering" against "dis-remembering" by redesignating history in a given place, time, and circumstance. This archeological act in its turn enables the dead to locate their neglected and forgotten bodies that have been pegged as historically "unspeakable things unspoken."[5] It is only after carrying out this archeological act that "the return of repressed" is enacted in a dream scene in the quoted passage. Reverend Ryu as well

as the reader begins to come to terms with their festering wounds by learning how to relate to their lives. Along tortuous paths of disavowal, recognition, and repossession, they *undo* the accusations directed to the dead and long gone. It is a mnemonic ritual of Hwang's literature to cope with, though not completely, the painful memories of the past.

IV. Inhating Local Contradictions, Engaging Global Mandates

The two Korean novelists, In-Hun Choi and Sok-Yong Hwang, engage in a kind of historiography. They have neither written historical fictions in any established sense nor exclusively oriented toward issues of aesthetic innovation. If "the internal politics of style" and "its external politics" are inextricably interconnected in Bakhtin's words (284), the two novelists share an interest in common in bringing to the fore such correlation by paying attention both to historical themes and to the innovative strategies of representation. While haunted by historical and political pressures that usually appear in the form of a nightmare, they are not merely "obsessed with the question of how we can come to know the past today" (Hutcheon 47). Instead, they have succeeded in juggling simultaneously the epistemological question of the "how" and the ontological question of the "what" by juxtaposing the past, present, and intertwined moments of history from both a local and global perspective.

Ironically, it may be said from the same critical angle that both Choi and Hwang betray the strains of being radically "caught between." They are caught between commitment to ideas and the forging of an aesthetic *avant-garde*. They struggle between the pressure to move forward and an impulse to look backward. However, juxtaposing various political and historical contexts with their formal innovations as discussed so far leads me to propose that their works can best be understood as evolving attempts to enact the conflicts and multiple binds of history and representation without ending up with the vapid question of if art could be both "engaged" and formally innovative. In other words, their liminality of being "caught between" is both symptomatic and determining of their textual intervention to work through the anxieties arising from at once inhabiting local contradictions and engaging global mandates. Given such an urgent task confronting them, the limited cultural space allowed for them becomes rather a space wherein a contingent local configuration appears in relation to multiple identifications which are themselves driven by specific contingencies in a larger global context. Choi and Hwang thus maneuver to circumvent those contingencies by charting a vexted but counter-hegemonic space where readers are enabled to recognize what "inhabiting local contradictions" and "engaging global mandates" simultaneously entail.

Notes

1. In an interview with Nak-Chung Paik, Jameson defines South Korea as "both an advanced and a Third World country" and Korea, both North and South, as "both First, Second, and Third World" due to the partition of the Korean Peninsula (364, emphasis in original).

2. Jameson shows deep concerns over this kind of possibility of misinterpretation in his discussion of third-world literature: "The third-world novel will not offer the satisfactions of Proust or Joyce; what is more damaging than that, perhaps, is its tendency to remind us of outmoded stages of our own first-world cultural development and to cause us to conclude that 'they are still writing novels like Dreiser or Sherwood Anderson'" (65).

3. See Cumings for those watershed moments in Korean history in 1960 and 1961,especially 344-61.

4. See Han for a detailed account of the Kwangju Democratization Movement and its aftermaths in Korean society.

5. I borrowed this phrase, "unspeakable things unspoken," from the title of Toni Morrison's well-known essay, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature."

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