Even the larger platforms where we might stretch our legs just raced past the window of our express train, which was travelling at some fifty kilometers an hour. Mountains, fields, rivers, small towns and telegraph poles; pedestrians, oxen and horses on long, straight asphalt roads. I conjured up the rich painting that would result if some kind of wall were to block off the space and time through which we were passing at such high speed and all these things were to hit that wall one by one, like oil strokes on a canvas. From time to time carriages swollen with people lingered on opposing platforms. Those freshly swept platforms and orderly, glittering rail tracks passed momentarily, indifferently outside the window, like scattered ruins; even the engines seemed like pieces of junk, despite the inertia left behind by the application of brakes and the fresh vigor of pistons heaving up and down; a rabble of bunched up faces brought to mind accident victims, squashed onto the windows with not so much as an inch separating them. All these things, too, would turn into specks on that canvas blocking off the space and time through which I passed.

—Ch’oe Myŏngik, “Patterns of the Heart”

The famous opening paragraph of the 1939 short story “Patterns of the Heart” (“Simmun”) by Ch’oe Myŏngik displays the paradoxical description and sensation of speed and shock characteristic of Korea’s late colonial-era modernist fiction. The protagonist, Kim Myŏngil, is speeding toward the northern Manchurian city of Harbin on the Asia Express, the fastest train in the Japanese Empire and indeed one of the fastest in the world at the time. But from the inside of one of its renowned, luxuriously air-conditioned carriages, Myŏngil can only picture the glittering high-end technology as already in ruins and the passengers as victims of a terrible crash. The high-speed train that was the symbol of imperial modernity here gestures toward the violence and destruction inherent in modernization in the empire. A temporal stasis accompanies this vivid image of modernity as ruination, a freezing of time amid the high-speed rumbling of the train. Myŏngil imagines the rapidly passing scenery hitting a wall that turns into a painter’s canvas, and both time and space are constrained into the strokes of oil on a painting. The forward-moving progress of the train is stymied into a painting that bears the traces of violence, of a splashing of brush strokes, and of a shocking halt.
As this story by Pyongyang-based writer Ch’oe Myŏngik (1902–?) unfolds, it becomes clear that the nature of stalled time is linked to an interrupted history figured in the charismatic character of Hyŏn Hyŏk, a revolutionary leader now slowly dying of heroin addiction and embroiled in a love triangle with Myŏngil. At one point, in a staged debate between the two characters, Hyŏn Hyŏk claims to be floating on a lake of time, on the memories of his revolutionary past. As a result, he has become one of the most celebrated depictions of the supposedly former revolutionary in what was imagined to be a postsocialist wartime Korean literature. Ch’oe’s story is sometimes read as vindication of the dying state of socialism under Japanese imperial rule and as proof that socialism had lost the decisive battle to fascism. Yet surviving on his memories does not mean that Hyŏn has cast aside his past—far from it; Ch’oe’s interrupted history seems to offer up a modernist nostalgia instead, one that is true to the forward-looking nature of nostalgia and that might help us re-envision the socialist trajectory across the mid-century Koreans.

That trajectory has been indelibly shaped by a virulently anticommunist colonial rule, followed by competing occupations in the early years of the Cold War. But the most decisive configuring force has without any doubt been the civil war and ongoing national division, which brought to the prosocialist and antisocialist movements and tendencies a new level of strength and longevity. The field of literary history has not been left untouched by this national and global conflict. Here the prime figures who have been rendered the fighting ground for the remembrance of a revolutionary history in South Korea are the so-called wŏlbukcha, or those who crossed over to the North. In the late 1940s and during the Korean War, many people crossed the thirty-eighth-parallel border into the territory of the opposing regime, whether out of political conviction, familial connection, or mere opportunism. Notable among those who moved to the northern side were many artists from colonial Korea’s vibrant modernist art scene. Poets, painters, musicians, and writers of the avant-garde chose to move north in large numbers, and as a result, their works were officially banned in the Republic of Korea until the relaxation of censorship laws in 1988. Many were later to be banned in the Democratic Republic as well, after falling foul of the political authorities in the 1950s. Having been literally consigned to memory for four decades, the return of their works and histories to public knowledge has been tenuous and uneven at best.

Ch’oe Myŏngik did not cross to the North; he did not need to, because he was already living in his hometown of Pyongyang. Nevertheless, his work was subject to the same censorious laws, and perhaps because of his colonial-era aestheticizations of what was to become the northern capital, he has not been rehabilitated in the South to the extent that some of his better-known peers have. His work also challenges some of the key frameworks within which Korean literary history is narrated. Despite the rather stark evidence of their decisive movement toward the northern regime, colonial Korea’s modernist artists are often pitted by critics and historians against an identifiably leftist revolutionary realism. Yet in “Patterns of the Heart,” Ch’oe configured both the formal and political stakes of Korea’s colonial modernism with an eye to the revolutionary impulse that is hard to ignore in even the most dogmatically procommunist or anticommmunist of readings. If a certain melancholic culture of defeat seems to steer that impulse, there is no reason to presume that Ch’oe endorsed the collapse of the socialist movement nor that his modernist aesthetic was antithetical to emancipatory longing. At the same time, we might perhaps expect a change in his later stories written after the founding of the Democratic Republic. What effect does the collapse of the empire, then, have on Ch’oe’s melancholic socialism? Does revolution cease to be clothed in the form of modernist nostalgia? Does it make literary sense to insist on a great divide, whether that divide be described as one of politics, of historical time, of the colonial versus the postcolonial, or of literary style such as modernism and realism?
The train crash at the end of time

At the risk of giving away my ending prematurely, the post-Liberation fictional terrain seems strewn with uncanny repetition. Here is the close of a 1951 story, “The Engineer” (“Kigwansa”), written by Ch’oe Myŏngik during the Korean War. Hyŏnjun, a prisoner of war, has been put to work driving locomotives for the southern army, when one day he is sent out on an urgent mission to recover a crowd of American soldiers and their stock of artillery and bombs. Although heavily guarded by South Korean Army and US Army officers, and his Japanese coal hand, he secretly unhinges the brakes to the attached carriages. Once those carriages have been fully loaded with soldiers and materiel, he speeds up the locomotive, racing straight through the station where they are supposed to disembark. He manages to fend off his guards, despite his getting shot, and pull on the front brake as the locomotive approaches an iron bridge. The carriages attached to the locomotive speed on, upending the entire vehicle and crashing spectacularly into the bridge: artillery is lit, bombs explode, and bodies hurl through the air, falling into the water, which is dyed red with blood. The story comes to a close with these paragraphs:

Hyŏnjun had been plucked from the inverted locomotive and fallen flat on his back on the gravel to one side, but now he opened his eyes. He saw the fruit of his victory in this spectacle before his very own eyes.

As those eyes began to dim he gazed up at the blue sky. It felt like the first time he had seen a sky so clear and high, and so deep and blue. Shiny white puffs of cloud floated across that blue sky.

Hyŏnjun grew very tired. As his eyes began to close, he seemed to remember something and barely managed to move an arm to feel the sleeve beneath one of his armpits. He felt something small but hard. It was his cherished party badge, which he had stitched in there. A smile of satisfaction and comfort flashed across Hyŏnjun’s face and slowly froze there as he closed his eyes for the last time.

These final lines confirm what the reader has already understood by this point: Hyŏnjun is looking upon a spectacle; his body has been cast to one side in order that he may provide the eyes through which the scene of the crash can be interpreted as a visual image. Preceding these paragraphs, the crash scene has been described at length in detail: its colors, its shapes, the destinations of the dead bodies, and the explosions have been laid out painstakingly, and the events in the crash unfold in extreme slow motion, as if, indeed, the brushstrokes had one by one committed oil to canvas to produce the final scene of a painting. It is as if the train crash envisioned in the opening paragraph of “Patterns of the Heart” has been literalized here at the end of the later story, suggesting that the author, whether consciously or unconsciously, is returning to his earlier story in order to probe further into the idea that had illuminated its opening paragraph and then use that same idea to bring some kind of closure to the later story.

The two short stories by Ch’oe Myŏngik reveal the uncanny repetition that seems to characterize the Korean modernist fiction of the mid-twentieth century: a train ride producing the spectacle of a train crash, the pausing of progressive time amid great speed, and a vision of death aligned with the power of technology. Can these stories help us rethink the history of Korean modernism, normally divided into colonial and postcolonial eras, as mid-century modernism? In other words, does the repetition of motifs, images, and even plots across the divide that is known as national liberation signify more than an individual author’s concerns and writerly habits? The present chapter approaches this question through an examination of instances, here specifically of the repeated appearance of the train and the freezing of time through the visualization of the...
train crash as a painting in Ch’oe’s fiction. Ch’oe himself drew attention to how he conceived of writing through the analogy of painting, and his detailed descriptions, of a more conspicuous thickness compared to other writers of his time, seem to confirm that although he was a champion of the medium of writing, he in his own writing had been significantly shaped by the impact of forms of visuality that seem deeply photographic and/or cinematic. The import of this lies less in its proof of intermediality, however, than in its effect on narrative time. It is this distinctive and complex figuration of time—as frozen, as slow, as repetitive, and thus as multiple—that speaks to the negating power of Ch’oe’s modernism, which conspicuously rejects the notion of progressive, linear time that had reigned as powerfully on the Korean Peninsula as elsewhere around the world in the early twentieth century.

Throughout his career, Ch’oe almost obsessively returned to the train as a literary device. Of his handful of colonial-era stories, the titular story of his later collection, “Changsam yisa” (Ordinary People), is also set in a train carriage traveling beyond the northern boundaries of Korea. There the railway carriage provides the stage for a first-person account of the interaction between a group of passengers who are sitting near a male human trafficker, who is in turn forcibly returning an escaped woman to a northern brothel. This scene of gendered violence interrupts a localized space, depicted through the heavy use of dialect and colorful characters, with the circulations and forced mobility central to the space of empire. In transporting Myŏngil into the upper reaches of Manchuria for an encounter with the revolutionary past and providing the vehicle for Hŏnjun’s self-sacrificing attack on enemy troops amid a civil war with international dimensions, the train provides the space and movement necessary in these stories as well for the imaginative inscription of colonial and neocolonial relations. That the train repeatedly appears in scenes of violence and distress in such contexts suggests that the train crash also has geopolitical significance. Its narrative import lies in the fact not only that it literally stops the movement of the train but that it also allows for the freezing and manipulation of time in Ch’oe’s writing. Whether through the detailed recording of a dialogue between passengers, the fantasy of a speeding train hitting a canvas as oil strokes, or the equally phantasmatic yet supposedly actualized crash, arguably in all three cases, the train provides the locus for the interruption of imperial time. But what enables the train to perform this function?

Ch’oe’s interest in the train invokes the key infrastructural technology associated with the narrative of modern progress, speed, and territorial expansion in Korea, as in other colonies around the world in the early twentieth century. His repeated return to the train in his short fiction occurs in a context where the train had already been established as a symbol of modernity and, in the colonial era, of Japanese imperial power. The term railway imperialism has been frequently used to highlight the intimate connections between imperial rule and railroad construction; historians of Korea have noted that the colony saw intense infrastructural development, with over six thousand kilometers of rail being laid over the course of colonial rule. The importance of the railway in Korea was enhanced by the peninsula’s geopolitical situation: the railroad stretching from Pusan in the South through the capital of Seoul and on up through Pyongyang was the very railroad that reached into the heart of Manchuria, transporting troops and war materiel after the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War, in the 1930s. The rail tracks on which Myŏngil heads toward his love triangle were those that interlinked the central areas of the Japanese Empire. Not surprisingly, given its material and symbolic significance, the railway featured early on in Korea’s literary modernity too. If in early prose fiction, such as Yi Injik’s famous 1906 story Hyŏl ŭi ri (Tears of Blood), the train played a mostly symbolic role, representing the advanced technological modernity of the Japanese metropole, then it had also begun to be used as a plot device allowing main characters to find each other in a chance meeting in a shared railway carriage. By the time that Yi Kwangsu wrote in 1917 what has become known as the first Korean-language modern novel, Mujŏng (Heartless), the railway carriage had
become a major novelistic space for encounters, lifesaving conversations, and imagined communities. For further examples of the extent of the train’s symbolic reach, look to the extant films from the 1930s and 1940s, which invariably feature scenes of powerful, fast, and modern steam locomotives rushing through the landscape. Moving-picture technology clearly enhanced its own relation to contemporaneity, movement, and the power to mobilize both audiences and armies through the regular depiction of steam engines racing across screens.

Ch’oe thus avails himself of a widely understood symbol of modernity and progress, and yet in his usage, that progress is brought into question. In “Patterns of the Heart,” Myŏngil has not boarded a generic train but rather the Asia Express, the most modern train in the empire, famous for the cosmopolitanism of its white female Russian servers, its state-of-the-art air-conditioned carriages, glamorous dining cars, and glass-enclosed observation deck. From the point of view of today’s long-divided present, it is hard to imagine the sense of space at that time, when one could travel by rail not only the entire length of the Korean Peninsula but on up toward the cosmopolitan northern city of Harbin and potentially across the entire Eurasian continent. Although in Ch’oe’s story the exotic character of the cosmopolitan remains, its glamor does not: the orderly, sparkling train tracks appear “like scattered ruins” and the trains “like pieces of junk,” and the passengers, with their faces stuck to the carriage windows, are “like accident victims.” The ironic and contradictory description foreshadows the tale that is about to unfold and undermine both faith in progress and all-powerful imperialism.

A writer returning to a motif, image, or plot at a later moment in time is surely not unusual, so why dwell on it here? In Ch’oe’s fiction, it is the speed of the train that allows for the critique of the notion of time as uniform and progressive. Ironically, the forward-moving propulsion of the engine seems to enable the cracking open of the homogeneity of time, achieved by the figuration of the slowing down or even stopping of time amid great speed. If this is suggested by the fantastic picture of a crashing halt in “Patterns of the Heart,” then in “The Engineer,” the high-speed passage to the final devastating crash is narrated in literary slow motion and in excruciating detail, as each move of the protagonist is spelled out so that the final journey comprises a full one-third of the story. The impact of the time-twisting capacities of the visual media of cinema is clearly evident in both stories, and this most modern, or modernist, of representational strategies allows for the negation or unsettling of the then-powerful idea of a homogeneous time progressing forward toward a never-ending future—the notion of time that enabled an understanding of history as progress and undergirded not only the concept of Western civilization but also the ideology of Japanese colonialism as a propeller of progress and development.

At the same time, in these stories, that forward-moving propulsion calls forth memory, which splinters the present with past remembrance. If the train in early stories such as “Tears of Blood” was starkly and statically symbolic, then in Ch’oe’s fiction, its speed allows for the advent of the heterogeneous time of memory. In “Patterns of the Heart,” Myŏngil sits in the dining car and recalls his split from his lover Yŏok on a previous trip north of the peninsula. The somehow incomplete nature of their split prefigures their surprise reenounter, which occurs once he reaches Harbin. In “The Engineer,” Hyŏnju’s memories of the past repeatedly resurface as he drives the locomotive along the same tracks that he had known so intimately before the war broke out. The sight of the now-devastated landscape to the side of the tracks and the charred remains of villages he can still recall bring to mind his last sighting of his wife and child before they had to flee. The past interrupts the present whenever he sits in the cab of the moving locomotive, as if transport through space is somehow connected to transport through time. In both stories, the repeated appearance of flashbacks and the stalling of time in slow motion present a complicated sense of temporality, one that ultimately cannot help but suggest, for readers of both, the repetitions between the stories themselves.
All stories incorporate to some extent a sense of the end of time—all stories need to end—and yet in these two stories, that ending is deadly. In “Patterns of the Heart,” the train crash is imagined by a first-person narrator who conjures up the crash as a painting through repeated similes while adding in an almost-confessional tone that he could “feel the illusion of a kind of adventure and enjoy a thrill in safety” as the train sped along “wildly.”14 By the end of the story, this thrill of a crash seems more like a prefiguration, as the love triangle implodes with the suicide of Yŏok. Meanwhile, in “The Engineer,” the crash is the culmination of events, a spectacle of destruction and the final sight—and accomplishment—of the dying hero Hyŏnjun. More needs to be said about this particular ending, but for now, it suffices to say that both stories propose a certain end of time, and in both cases, that ending struggles to bring closure or impose a determinate meaning on the story. On the most literal level, death brings an end to the entangled temporalities that have been invoked throughout the stories, and yet in the absence of closure, there remains the sense that a unified time and meaning has not been imposed, or may even have been refused.

“Patterns of the Heart” purports to tell the story of a “former” revolutionary, but the portrayal of Hyŏn Hyŏk in a state of grandiose decline, stage-managing the triangulated encounter and displaying all of the charisma and larger-than-life character of a revolutionary leader, fails to convincingly narrate the end of socialism. The endurance of the revolutionary in the story lies outside the borders of Korea, but it is described in the Korean language and published in a peninsula-based journal at a virulently anticommunist time—when the Communist Party and the organized leftist writers’ movement (KAPF) had been formally dissolved and when censorship prevented affirmative depictions of leftist thought. The gloomy atmosphere brings to mind more recent discussion of leftist melancholia by historian Enzo Traverso, who argues that the apparent defeat of socialism at the end of the twentieth century (what is known as the end of the Cold War in more Eurocentric circles) might not be an ending at all but instead something that demands the rethinking of “socialism in a time in which its memory is lost, hidden, and forgotten and needs to be redeemed.”15 In his reading of what he terms “left melancholy,” Traverso argues that the lost object of nostalgia in the current moment may not be real socialism but rather “the struggle for emancipation as a historical experience that deserves recollection and attention in spite of its fragile, precarious, and ephemeral duration.”16 Traverso’s notion of nostalgia owes much to the heterodox thinking of Walter Benjamin, a contemporary of Ch’oe Myŏngik, although the two would not have known of each other’s existence. Yet the Jew in exile from Hitler’s Germany and the colonized writer from the Japanese Empire shared a common historical experience of enduring a totalitarian regime and the apparent loss of their emancipatory dreams. It is hard to argue that, despite all obstacles, either of them gave up hope for redemption—that is, hope for a time when those dreams might still come true, even if they appeared dashed in the present moment. It seems to me that this hope is instantiated through Ch’oe’s depictions of modernist time, which allow for the coexistence of nonsynchronous times and the possibilities of endurance beyond ending. What is at stake for Ch’oe in his attack on progressive time is indeed the possibility of future redemption.

Traverso writes, toward the end of his book, of the belief held by many Marxist thinkers in revolutions as the “locomotives of history,” pushing forward and rendered inevitable by an understanding of time that is equally as progressive as that historicism of an opposing political color. Benjamin, Traverso argues, refused this idea of progress, which was symbolized on both left and right by the train, and instead understood the revolution as “the ‘emergency brake’ stopping the train’s rush towards catastrophe.”17 Colonial Korea’s modernists would have understood Benjamin’s distrust of progress and his elaboration of other, more heterogeneous forms of time. Unlike Benjamin, many of them survived to see the collapse of one totalitarian regime and live
through an attempt at actualizing a national revolution. With this in mind, I now revisit Ch’oe’s postcolonial work and return to both the ending of “The Engineer” and the question posed at the beginning of this chapter, that of whether national liberation can also be melancholic. This question is central to Ch’oe’s practice of socialist modernism and indeed to my rethinking of the idea of mid-century modernism.

**Melancholic martyrdom**

Many friends of mine in equally dire straits have forged their own destiny according to the saying, “Never say die.” Some of my old comrades have found new paths, even if it meant a one-hundred-and-eighty degree about-turn. I don’t mean to criticize them. But I was the only one who despaired.¹⁸

Now I live like this on morphine vapor and memories of old dreams. . . . My memories of the past have become more dazzling and the food for my dreams has become ever richer.¹⁹

Hyŏn Hyŏk narrates his turn to morphine addiction by contrasting it with another turn: the one made by his old comrades who had performed a 180-degree turn by renouncing socialism and espousing the cause of the Japanese imperial war. These conversions swept the socialist ranks of the Japanese Empire in the mid-1930s, as the leftist movements collapsed under the pressure of imprisonment, torture, and other forms of extreme suppression.²⁰ The term former revolutionary was attached to those who so publicly stated their pasts to have been a mistake, such as the KAPF writer Pak Yŏnghŭi (1901–?), who memorably declared on the front pages of the Tonga ilbo newspaper in the first week of 1934 that “what we gained was ideology and what we lost was art.”²¹

He was referring to the KAPF advocacy of a self-consciously political practice of writing. As the scholar Kim Yunsik has pointed out, the converts did not merely renounce socialism as false ideology but inevitably espoused new beliefs in its stead, whether in the Japanese national spirit or in what Pak called art.²² Hyŏn’s embrace of despair appears in this context as an intransient refusal to adopt a substitute for socialism; instead he chooses to dwell on “memories of the past” and “old dreams” that appear ever richer and more dazzling. I cannot think of a more vivid example of what the colonial Marxist philosopher Sŏ Insik (1906–?) termed the “beauty of longing and decadence,” which was built on the irony, paradox, and contradiction that he believed offered the only way forward for those who “live at a distance from a reality with which they cannot compromise either intellectually or emotionally.”²³ The political climate of late colonial Korea—subject to harsh wartime restrictions and surveillance—did not allow for mourning the emancipatory longings that had fueled a generation of artists and activists. In this case, negation, paradox, and irony offered an alternative mode for endurance and for keeping the love object in sight.

By 1951, Ch’oe Myŏngik, living in a Pyongyang that has become the capital of the three-year-old Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, no longer has to submerge any revolutionary desires in his writing. In stories such as “Mach’ŏn Peak” (“Mach’ŏllyŏng,” 1947), set in 1936, he recalls the colonial era, not through the eyes of a drug-addicted exile but as the stage for the resilience and dedication of imprisoned leftist guerrillas.²⁴ The oft-cited exuberance and relief of being able to reclaim dreams of revolution left their mark on his fiction as well.²⁵ By the time that Ch’oe wrote “The Engineer,” however, a firm line divided the peninsula at the thirty-eighth parallel and a devastating civil war was in full course; the story appeared in the spring of 1951 and is set in the previous fall, after the Inch’ŏn Landing and as the UN forces were pushing their way back up toward Pyongyang and northern Korea. Hyŏnju’n’s colonial-era expertise as an engineer has
compelled the South Korean Army officials to pluck him out of a prison cell and put him to work shunting materiel on a local railway line, under close supervision of a South Korean sergeant and his coal hand, a Japanese dwarf. The latter is an unlikely character but clearly allows for the history of colonialism to be incorporated into the imaginary terrain of the story with the added postcolonial cunning of reducing the former imperial power to the body of a dwarf. More importantly, the presence of the dwarf signifies one of many historical repetitions, implying here that post-US occupation South Korea is still a colony. These repetitions, always in difference, point to the logic of one major strand of mid-century modernism, which continues the story of socialist melancholy.

The final lines of “The Engineer” should bring the closure of Hyŏnjun’s victory. He has hatched his opportunistic plot to bring about the train crash that will destroy not only the strategically important railway tracks and an iron bridge but also all the American soldiers and their weapons on board. He then gazes upon the scene of victory—and devastation—and he dies, alone. As he gazes up at the “sky so clear and high, and so deep and blue,” in which “shiny white puffs of cloud” float past, anyone familiar with the iconography of the Asia–Pacific War, which includes Ch’oe Myŏngik and all of his contemporary readers, is immediately struck by this heavenly reappearance. Fiction, films, paintings, and magazine covers from the early 1940s that sought to persuade young readers to sign up for the Imperial Army invariably showed the young boy soldiers standing against the clear blue sky as shiny white puffs of cloud passed by.26 This was the same blue sky through which the young kamikaze pilots were to take their last flights, and surely no reader in the middle of war missed the irony of Hyŏnjun giving his life in solitude as a martyr for the nation, when the same sacrifice had been demanded of young Koreans less than a decade earlier, if for a different nation. The “smile of satisfaction and comfort” that freezes on Hyŏnjun’s face seems cold comfort for a lonely death—then being multiplied across the peninsula in real life—and undermines any argument that this story is mere war propaganda rather than a complex meditation on historical repetition.

Clearly the interruptive potential of this melancholic ending was recognized at the time too, given that when the story was republished a year later, this time as the titular story for a collection of short fiction by Ch’oe Myŏngik, the ending had been rewritten. 27 Whereas the earlier version of the story had ended with Hyŏnjun gazing upon his achievement with his dying breath, in the later version, he had managed to raise his upper body for one last time to bring a stone down onto the head of the South Korean sergeant, who was trying to crawl away. And then, the story concluded with the following two paragraphs:

A new grave was dug out beneath a large acorn tree in a deep valley behind a small village that was located about five ri from the iron bridge. In front of that grave, on a carefully trimmed oak grave-post, vivid brush strokes spelled out the words “Hyŏnjun, member of the Workers Party.”

When the American bastards had heard that their military train had been overturned they had forcibly mobilized the neighboring peasants to clear up the site.

Several of the peasants had realized that this was our engineer, not only was his the lone body wearing clothes in the color of a worker’s uniform but he had clearly collapsed fighting to the last with those American bastards and sacrificed himself in order to overturn the military train and kill several thousand enemy soldiers. The peasants had returned again at night, evading the bastards’ sight, in order to extract Hyŏnjun’s body and give it a proper burial. As they buried him they had discovered a small party badge hidden folded into the sleeves of his uniform under his armpits; they had told their village Cell Committee Head, who had participated in the partisan struggle near Yangdŏk, and had this grave-post erected.28
In this version, Hyŏnjun’s lonely death is folded back into a community with the final burial and collective memorialization of his sacrifice. The intransigent, unpredictable force of melancholy is tamed somewhat through a ritualized process of mourning; his death is given a meaning within the context of the ongoing postcolonial struggle for a socialist, national revolution. Hyŏnjun’s efforts are affirmed by a partisan with authority in the governing social structure and thus incorporated into the public history of attempted national unification under a socialist banner. The final paragraph thus attempts to provide a definitive, and significant, meaning to the entire story, which might control the more ambiguous and multilayered memories generated at other points in the text. Because the additional paragraphs suggest a felt necessity to control signification, they ironically manage to draw attention precisely to the less-unidirectional meaning of the story up to this point.

It is irony, rather than the allegory more usually invoked in discussions of third-world literature, that Simon Gikandi has named central to the production of what he calls early postcolonial style. Gikandi’s reading of postcolonial novels might help us place Korea’s post-Liberation fiction also in the wider world of the literature of global decolonization. He contests the scholarly tendency to dismiss the apparent realist historicism of such novels, arguing instead that the literature of the postcolonial world had no option but to contend with historicism as a problem of representation bequeathed by colonialism. At the same time, that literature also marked the limits of historicism and attempted to inscribe a “new politics of time and space.”

Gikandi turns to the endings of postcolonial novels and the problems with closure that they display, noting that they tend to inscribe the “failure of . . . a postcolonial wish fulfillment rather than the phenomenology of a happy ending” and expose the “symbolic order of decolonization, the time and space of the new nation, as a time of disorder and emptiness.” In trying to think through decolonization as a literary event, then, Gikandi also discovers a surprising melancholy to postcolonial novels and their endings: “These melancholic moments—and the pathos of lack that define them—are the signatures of what I would like to call a postcolonial mimesis. They are marks of a temporality stranded between the time of a dying colonialism and a stillborn nationalism.”

The two endings of “The Engineer” point to a similar gap between the joyous relief of imperial collapse and the fulfillment of revolutionary nationalism. The melancholic interregnum between an apparent end of empire and a violent splintering of national territory, between the dreams of revolution and the realization that colonialism has not died, prevents any naïve belief in a decisive and smooth historicist progression into postcolonial time. Instead, that postcolonial time can be represented only as fragmented and palimpsestic, empty only in the sense that the future has not yet appeared, and shaped by forms of repetition. There is neither cause to deny the heterogeneous representations of time nor cause to presume that the vision of destruction at the end of “The Engineer” lacks irony. Hyŏnjun’s melancholic martyrdom cannot help but recall colonial history and simultaneously call into question the promise of the future. This is precisely the point at which Ch’oe Myŏngik’s fiction joins the ranks of global modernism, because if the movements of political decolonization indeed formed a global movement in the mid-twentieth century, then mid-century modernism unsurprisingly responded to that fundamental experience of the era.

Mid-century modernism

Once he had discarded the “insight” of the modernist, it was no longer possible to question modernity. Wasn’t the confrontation with modernity made possible by directly examining the uneven fissures that modernity had brought on?
Crossing the great divide

This verdict on Ch’oe Myŏngik after Liberation, rendered by the respected scholar of North Korean literature Sin Hyŏnggi, is symptomatic of readings of Korea’s mid-twentieth-century history. Ch’oe’s two stories are located on opposing sides of a seemingly unbridgeable divide, when it comes to the narration of modern Korean literature and its history, and that divide tends to govern how the two stories are read. Whereas most scholars would affirm Ch’oe Myŏngik’s status as a modernist writer during the colonial era, with “Patterns of the Heart” frequently listed as a representative work, the term modernist is not used to refer to works he wrote after 1945 in the nascent Democratic People’s Republic. Sin offers a stark judgment on Ch’oe’s later work: “He could no longer be a modernist.”33 By suggesting that modernism involves the questioning of modernity, Sin tries to move beyond the version of the realism—modernism polarity that has loomed so prominently over the narration of modern Korean literary history in the Cold War era, whereby realism and modernism are associated with socialist politics and its opponents or agnostics, respectively. But, unwilling to recognize any fissures in the Democratic People’s Republic, Sin ends up reinscribing the logic of an insurmountable divide between the two stories written twelve years apart. The term modernism provides the means for Sin to draw this historical line, but could the concept instead enable a reading of mid-twentieth-century texts that is less in thrall to the power of either of the competing nation-states on the peninsula or to the lingering Cold War remnants of global aesthetics? Could Ch’oe’s socialist melancholy then turn out to comprise one important strand of a truly mid-century modernism, one that straddled the liberatory divide to witness a repressed antitotalitarian and truly postcolonial future?

Modernism understood as a mode of temporal negation, situated in relation to the time culture of modernity and reshaping, perhaps even revolutionizing, cultural forms, should draw our attention to points of interruption to the dominant historicist narratives that undergirded regimes of both colonialism and totalitarian communism.34 Of course, the unidirectional pursuit of progress was brought into question not only through emancipatory longings but equally through the dreams of fascist imaginaries, as mid-century Korean fiction displays in a particularly stark fashion. To understand modernism in this way does, as Paul Saint-Amour has recently argued, weaken its theory to some extent, as it is no longer understood in specific formal terms and begins to encompass a much broader archive of cultural texts and political projects.35 Yet this idea of modernism potentially allows for thinking world literatures contemporaneously. This becomes all the more vital when we start to think about the politics of reading texts from the early Democratic People’s Republic, texts that on the stage of world literature are marked by the doubly marginalized status of belonging both to the formerly colonized world and to the world of new socialist movements. The form-producing force of negation equally helps us wend our way through the fog of the fascist empire’s cultural production and its reactionary modernism, trying not to reproduce the judgments or wish fulfillments of that empire. Most importantly, in recognizing the underlying temporal forces of Korea’s mid-century fiction, powerfully evident in its uncanny repetitions, we can start to question the geopolitical and historiographical conventions that guide our reading of cultural forms and instead allow those forms to teach us something about the experience of modernity on the Korean Peninsula mid-century and how it connected to the rest of the world.

The polarities that structure the narration of Korean literary history in particular are sustained by the system of national division, properly understood within a global environment of the Cold War and supposedly post–Cold War eras. That narratives of Korean literary history tend to unfold as a series of polarities suggests not only the hold of the nation-state over histories of national literatures but also something that is so often overlooked: two warring nation-states are laying claim to the same territory and language. In twentieth-century literary history, the
divided peninsula and competing states seem to ricochet through a series of further contestations: north and south, left and right, leading to ideas of the political versus the “pure” and the globalized literary terms of realism versus modernism. The endurance that these polarities display in scholarship on Korean literature is a testament to the division system on the peninsula, even when those polarities predate the division. And even though these structures of thought have loosened since the end of Cold War in Europe, that they stubbornly remain in their weakened state should remind us that the Cold War never did end in East Asia. Perhaps the literature of Korea even offers a globally avant-garde, rather than backward, glance precisely because it cannot sufficiently pretend to have moved beyond the political oppositions of the Cold War.

These enduring divides work to stifle readings that acknowledge irony, multiple temporalities, or fissures in texts from the Democratic People’s Republic, as they do also in the retrospective organization of texts from the late colonial period. The effect is particularly striking in how scholars have dealt with works by those famous colonial-era modernist artists and writers who either stayed in the North or moved there after Liberation. There is little attempt to convey a sense of continuity in their life work; they are deemed instead to have performed an ideological “turn” from modernism to realism, from aesthetics to politics, or from literature to propaganda. More often their post-Liberation work is simply ignored or confined to separate or isolated study as a reflection of their political convictions rather than subject to interpretation as aesthetic texts. Precisely such overdetermined readings of these authors’ lives and works, however, make these works rich terrain for a rethinking of the concept of modernism so that it could acknowledge both their literariness and their contemporaneity with the global modernity of the time. Such a project would not only try to free itself from the fetters of determination by national division but also contribute to a more expansive view of mid-twentieth-century global literary modernity and especially the understanding of the socialist trajectory of modernism in its appearances in the decolonizing world. This is to advocate not for a narrative of seamless continuity between the late colonial and post-Liberation eras but rather for turning to the works of writers such as Ch’oe Myŏngik, to see how they exposed, challenged, or reconciled the contradictory and intense experiences that decolonization amid the Cold War occupations created. These writers were among the many individuals who had to live through this historical and ideological divide, and their work could not emerge from a revolutionary degree zero even if they liked to claim as such, but instead, it was necessarily inflected by a predivision past.

Readings of the work of Ch’oe Myŏngik have tended to be symptomatic of division rather than exploratory of its permutations. It is fair to say that Ch’oe Myŏngik has long perplexed scholars, who have struggled to define both his politics and his style. Take the veteran critic Kim Yunsik’s concluding statement on reading Ch’oe’s work: “The problem is how to discuss the connections in the deeper structure of modernist realism or realist modernism in order to better understand our literature.” Kim was troubled by elements in Ch’oe’s writing that seem to confound a simple dichotomy between realism and modernism: the degree of descriptive detail and attention to visual representation and use of stream of consciousness, montage, and other renowned motifs of the avant-garde coincide with a critique of imperialism in his fiction, which is more usually associated with realism. It is Ch’oe’s lifelong association with his hometown of Pyongyang however, that has silently shaped his absence from mainstream literary history in South Korea, because he remained in the North during the 1930s, when other writers invariably moved to join the literary center coalescing in Seoul, and he continued to live there as the peninsula was gradually divided into two. As a result, the lyrical urban poetics of his early fiction paint a memorable picture of colonial-era Pyongyang, known at the time as one of the most modern of Korea’s burgeoning cities. Alternatively, his colonial-era stories take readers to the
northern-bound peripheries of the Japanese Empire, where revolutionaries die in exile from the colony. For those writers who went north without obvious leftist sympathies and whose fiction was rooted in Seoul’s changing neighborhoods, such as Yi T’aejun or Pak T’aewŏn, it has not been too hard to restore their status—on the basis of their works written before Liberation. Their fiction aids in the recent celebratory retellings of colonial-era Seoul, in which the Japanese commercial district of Honmachi, jazz, flâneurship, and café society are heralded as prefigurations of the hypermodern, hypercapitalist Seoul of the twenty-first century. History is always written from the present, but what kind of present would be told by acknowledging the modernity of Pyongyang?

Ch’oe Myŏngik’s work from across the decades of the 1930s to early 1950s suggests an alternative historical pattern of repetition. The two stories discussed here sit uncomfortably within a progressive narrative of history, which they interrupt in crucial ways. Identifying the repetitions between the two works, rather than weaving a line of transformation from one to the other toward a state-driven narrative either of the total defeat of socialism or its freezing into totalitarian stasis, allows for a different, more melancholic history of the socialist trajectory in mid-century modernism, one that still holds out for the possibility of redemption for the emancipatory longings that shape both stories. After all, if war and sacrifice for a state are narrated in Ch’oe’s work as central to the experience of modernity, the dreams of socialism are not dead but endure. They suggest that what was at stake in Korea’s early postcolonial fiction, as in other postcolonial literatures around the world at that time, was not just any kind of liberation but a liberation that could instantiate the emancipatory dreams of the past. If the future of Pyongyang did not turn out the way imagined at the founding of the state, that does not negate the complex, imagined futures of the middle decades of the twentieth century. When we cross the divide to read the works of those decades, it becomes apparent that, against what we have been taught, mid-century modernism is a meaningful category for Korean literary history. Moreover, national division within the decolonizing movements of the early Cold War era was a fundamental experience in global modernity, one that was not unique to the Korean Peninsula; perhaps it is precisely the experience through which we might reconsider what it meant to be both modern and modernist in the mid-twentieth century.

Notes

1 Ch’oe Myŏngik, "Simmun," 3–49.
2 For an example of such a reading of Ch’oe’s story, see Cho Chŏngnae, “Singminji t’ŏksusŏng kwa kūndaesŏng ū mijŏk sîch’ŏn,” 223–28.
3 On the utopian nature of nostalgia, see Stewart, On Longing, 23:

Hostile to history and its invisible origins, and yet longing for an impossibly pure context of lived experience at a place of origin, nostalgia wears a distinctly utopian face, a face that turns toward a future-past, a past which has only ideological reality. This point of desire which the nostalgic seeks is the absence that is the very generating mechanism of desire... The realization of re-union imagined by the nostalgic is a narrative utopia that works only by virtue of its partiality, its lack of fixity and closure; nostalgia is the desire for desire.

4 In the immediate wake of the rescinding of the publication ban appeared a flurry of new editions of works by those who went north and related scholarly criticism. See, for example, Kwŏn et al., Wŏlbuk munnin yŏn’gu. With increased communication between north and south, more information has emerged about the lives lived after crossing the border into the north, although that information remains often hard to confirm. See Cho Yŏngbok, Wŏlbuk yesulga ore e ich’yojan kŭdul.
6 Ibid., 24.
7 For Ch’oe’s essays on his own writing practice, see Ch’oe Myŏngik, Kŭl e tachan saenggak.
8 Ch’oe Myŏngik, “Changsam yisa,” 36–49.
9 See, for example, Davis and Wilburn, *Railway Imperialism*. On the railway in colonial Korea, see Pak Ch’ŏnhong, *Maehok ū chilju*, kŭndae ū hoengdan. Bruce Cumings notes that more than six thousand kilometers of rail was laid. See Cumings, *Korea’s Place in the Sun*, 165–67.
10 Some examples are *Kŭmyŏng yŏk’ch’a*, dir. Sŏ Kwange, 1938, which centers on a plot to blow up a train transporting military supplies; *Pando ū pem*, dir. Yi Pyŏngil, 1941, in which the united lovers gather at a railway station in the final scene to depart for the Japanese metropole; and *Chŏnwŏnyŏng*, dir. An Sŏkyŏng, 1941, in which the protagonist, a volunteer soldier, leaves aboard a train to go to the warfront.
11 On the Asia Express, see Young, *Japan’s Total Empire*, 246–47.
12 Lutz Koepnick’s study of slow modernism is helpful for thinking about a similar aesthetics of time and speed. See Koepnick, *On Slowness*.
13 On this idea of time and its relationship to the nation form and colonialism, see Anderson, *Imagined Communities; Tanaka, New Times in Modern Japan*.
15 Ibid., 52.
16 Ibid., 226–27.
18 Ibid., 27.
19 On the so-called conversions, see Kim Yunsik, “Chŏnhyangnon” and “1930 nyŏndaehubang k’ap’ŭ munindŭl ŭi chŏnhyang yuyŏng punsŏk.”
20 Pak Yŏnghŭi, “Ch’wigung muneje ŭi sinchŏngae wa kû kyŏnghyang,” January 4, 1934.
21 Kim Yunsik, “Chŏnhyang sosŏl ŭi han’gutchaŏk yangsang.”
22 Sŏ Insik, “Aesu wa t’woep’ye ŭi mît,” 60.
24 One of the common ways in which Liberation is narrated in fiction written soon after 1945 was as the joy of being able to “return” to socialism. For examples, see Chi Haryŏn, “Tŏjŏng’; Yi T’aejun, “Hae-bang chŏnhŭ.”
25 For a fictional version, one might look at Ch’oe Chŏnghŭi, “Yagikushŏ.” On the visual arts of the war, see Kim Yunsu et al., *Han’guk misul 100 nyŏn* I, 378; also Minjok munje yŏn’gu, *Singmunji Chosŏn kwa chŏnjang misul*.
26 For a fictional version, one might look at Ch’oe Chŏnghŭi, “Yagikushŏ.” On the visual arts of the war, see Kim Yunsu et al., *Han’guk misul 100 nyŏn* I, 378; also Minjok munje yŏn’gu, *Singmunji Chosŏn kwa chŏnjang misul*.
27 Ch’oe Myŏngik, “Kigwansa,” 79–123.
28 Ibid., 123.
30 Ibid., 174–75.
31 Ibid., 176.
32 Ibid., 346–47.
33 Sin Hyŏnggi, “Haesŏl: Han modŏnis暗示 ŭi haengno,” 331.
34 Osborne, “Modernism as Translation.”
36 Kim Yunsik, *Han’guk hyŏndaehyŏnsilhwa yŏn’gu*, 111.
37 For discussions of how realism and modernism have been both opposed and entangled in Korean literary histories, see Hanseon, *The Real Modern; Park, The Proletarian Wave*.
38 The modernity of Pyongyang is regularly asserted in publications from and about colonial Korea. For one example, see Kim Yŏnok et al., “Nae chibang ŭi ŭksaek ŭl malhanin chwadamhoe.”

Works cited

Crossing the great divide


———. Kıl e taehan saenggok [Thoughts on Writing]. Pyongyang: Chosŏn munhak yestul ch’ongdonaeng ch’ulp’ansa, 1964.


———. “Simmun” [Patterns of the heart]. Munjang 1, no. 5 (June 1939): 3–49.


