The proletarian literary movement was one arm of a larger proletarian arts movement that was popularized during the 1920s and 1930s in colonial Korea. Scholars have characterized the period between 1925 and 1935 as a red decade, during which time leftist art movements paved the way for dynamic representations of working- and lower-class experience across East Asia and in the global sphere.  

In Korea, the movement was spearheaded by the Korean Artist Proletarian Federation, or KAPF (Korea Artista Proletara Federatio), and involved experimental efforts not only in literature but also in criticism, theater, film, and visual art. The official theoretical apparatus of the group was rooted in Marxist theory; in addition, many members who became active in KAPF in the late 1920s had been politicized through their studies in Japan, so the group was greatly influenced by the Japanese socialist movement, represented initially by the All Japan Federation of Proletarian Arts (NAPF) and then Japan Proletarian Culture Federation (KOPF) after 1931. Despite this grounding in leftist ideology, standards for the aesthetic form and content of proletarian literature and, later, socialist realism were not expressly determined by ideology and thus became key points of dissension. Korean literary scholars in the late twentieth century have characterized the movement a “failed movement” because of its inconsistencies, internal conflicts, and departures from its ideological foundation. When reflecting on the proletarian literature movement, scholars have often attributed its lack of “success” to KAPF’s inability to articulate and apply orthodox principles of Marxism and its short period of activity, the latter of which ended with many of the writers recanting their leftist politics.

Setting questions of the movement’s success and failure aside, this chapter will explore how the Korean proletarian literature movement challenged existing ideological systems of representation in colonial Korea. The Korean proletarian culture movement was significant for its explorations in a variety of artforms, such as theater, film, and other art, and especially for its unprecedented focus on the representations of the lower classes. Because of this focus, Korean proletarian literature was the preeminent form of mass culture in connecting to the material realities of colonization and class inequality. Korean Marxism, a hybrid adaptation to different populations and contexts, was an ideological movement well positioned to respond to the discordance arising from growing class disparities and contention between bourgeois aesthetics and the realities of Korean peasant life. The Korean proletarian culture movement was founded in an attempt to develop a cultural movement by and about the Korean lower class, challenging existing structures of representation that had prioritized a privileged male intellectual subject by
featuring the diverse representation of adults and children and by making connections among those increasingly disenfranchised under uneven modernization and capitalism: factory workers, migrant laborers, tenant farmers, and peasants.

Korean proletarian literature emerged under a confluence of conditions. In light of the March First Movement in 1919 and the subsequent relaxation of cultural policies by the government-general, leftist organizations were allowed to develop and flourish in the 1920s and early 1930s; KAPF, the umbrella organization for the promotion of Marxist theory, formed in this period of cultural and political tolerance. It was active for about a decade, dissolving in 1935 amid the colonial government’s enforcement of stricter political censorship as it ramped up the mobilization of colonial territories for the Asia–Pacific War effort. Although the changing tenor of Japanese imperial governance bracketed the growth and decline of the movement, the accompanying colonial modernization—urbanization, industrialization, public education, and establishment of print culture—provided the material conditions to establish a proletarian culture movement. An emergent print culture, in the form of periodicals such as New Life (Sin saenghwal), The Opening of the World (Kaebyŏk), The Chosŏn Literary World (Chosŏn mundan), and Light of Korea (Chosoˇn chi kwang), was a crucial platform for the dialogue among writers, artists, and the public.

From the early 1920s on, socially oriented intellectuals grew more and more interested in thinkers who imagined a radically different world, and they gravitated toward the socialist tradition. When proto-leftist literary groups PASKYULA and The Spark Society (Yŏnggunsu) allied to create KAPF in August of 1925, the goal was to challenge what literary critics at the time called bourgeois aesthetics, a culture that they argued perpetuated an art for art’s sake aesthetic that “concealed” the class realities of the time. The members of KAPF advocated for a new mode of cultural production: an art for life that was grounded in social reality, class struggle, and the proletarian experience.3

The organization around the Korean lower class was fueled by a social climate that was ripe for change. As Sunyoung Park has argued, the Tonghak Rebellion at the turn of the century and the subsequent continued unrest of the peasants in the countryside helped provide the groundwork for leftist politics.4 In turn, literary and visual representations of class issues in newspapers and magazines coalesced into the image of the peasant as a common representation of mass subjectivity. These images were accompanied by reportage from the countryside that revealed worsening conditions for peasants, many of whom had become tenant farmers in the colonial agricultural system. As the colonial government consolidated the nation’s banking infrastructure, increasing amounts of land passed into the hands of Japanese corporations and moneylenders.5 The proliferation of images in print culture in the 1920s of the suffering peasant body resulted in that body becoming a powerful iconic figure for the proletarian culture movement. These images testified to the peasant’s heavy burden due to debt, agricultural production demands, colonial taxes, and the lack of infrastructure to protect their crops and villages from natural disasters. It was within this environment of unrest that KAPF literary critics adopted Marxist frameworks to write about the Korean masses in literature.

In the mid–1920s, KAPF literary critics and writers began to establish the parameters of what this art for life should be and to solidify the formal characteristics of proletarian literature. Kim Kijin and Pak Yŏnghŭi were leading figures in this discussion of the aesthetic standards of proletarian literature. In 1925, Kim Kijin wrote a feature for The Opening of the World magazine that described proletarian literature as literature founded in a proletarian consciousness that radically opposed bourgeois consciousness.6 The articulation...
of this type of broad goal was typical of literary criticism of the mid-1920s, since the KAPF leadership provided general ideological guidelines but did not dictate the formal conventions of proletarian literature. Many of the qualities for which proletarian literature is noted are due to the individual writer’s artistic inclinations.

The call for realism provided the impetus for a literature in the 1920s that was grounded in the everyday conditions of the lower classes. One strain in this literary output was new tendency literature, introduced by Pak in December of 1925 in a series of essays featured in The Opening of the World titled “New Tendency Literature and Its Literary Position” (Shin’gyōhgyang’a munhak kwa kū mundenjŏk chiwi). Pak coined the term new tendency literature to categorize the body of works produced in late 1924 and 1925 by proletarian writers, some of the most notable of which were Yi Kiyŏng’s “The Poor” (Kananhan saramdŭl, 1925), Chu Yŏsŏp’s “Murder” (Sarin, 1925), Kim Kijin’s “Rat Fire” (Pulgŭn chwi, 1924), Cho Myŏng-hŭi’s “Into the Earth” (Ttangsgukuro, 1925) and Choe Sŏhae’s “Starvation and Carnage” (Kia wa Salyuk, 1925). Pak argued that although the works did not meet the highest standards of class literature, they did succeed in creating a new kind of literary tendency that departed from the “degenerate” interior style of bourgeois literature through their unique focus on material life and emancipatory aspirations.

This style of literature focused particularly on the proletarian body and depictions of the physical manifestations of social marginalization. New tendency literature usually followed a simple narrative structure that documented the violent and sensational downfall of a poor male character—tenant farmer, laborer, poor intellectual—because of socially determined circumstances. These circumstances, most often poverty and resultant starvation and sickness, were described in graphic detail, driving home the physical debilitation of the main characters as an expression of their helplessness in the face of grinding class inequality.

In the mid-1920s, many leftist writers wrote in the style of new tendency literature, responding with a proletarian consciousness that was firmly rooted in the matter of the body as a site for class struggle. In this aspect, the sensational descriptions of bodily suffering were a response to the work of contemporary authors that focused on the emotion and interiority of the subject, themes that KAPF theorists criticized as “bourgeois,” “romantic” (nangmanp’a), and “emotional” (kamsŏng). New tendency narratives did not have such interiority; conflicts were external and resolved in explosive violence. The main character, oppressed by hopeless material conditions, has no choice but to resist with violence, murder, and arson. Although this aspect of new tendency literature became a nexus of critique, with some literary critics denouncing it as sensationalism, this quality also speaks to the intervention of the material, the raw physical deterioration of the body as a result of poverty.

Ch’oe Sŏhae, a prolific writer of new tendency literature, produced a variety of stories about itinerant life, poverty, and class hardship. Of the more than sixty texts that he authored during his short life, “Exodus” (T’alch’ulki, 1925), “Pak Tol’s Death” (Pak Tol ŭi chugŭm, 1925), “Starvation and Carnage” (Kia wa sa’ryuk, 1925), “After the Flood” (K’ŭnmul chin twi, 1925), and “Red Flame” (Hongyŏm, 1927) were some of the short stories that received the most recognition for representing this new tendency style. In most of the narratives, a family is stricken with poverty and sickness and has to contend with natural disasters. Featuring itinerant tenant farmers and laborers as protagonists, Ch’oe details the life of lower-class people in rural areas where it was difficult to get enough food to eat, procure medicine for sickness, and maintain livable homes in the wake of floods and fires. Ch’oe’s stories capture a particularly incendiary class anger that gradually builds in the protagonists as they lose their wives and children to unlivable social conditions. Marginalized and receiving no assistance from others, these protagonists erupt into sensational violent resistance, consumed by an anger that wants to engulf everything.
Although the new tendency style did capture lower-class realities forcefully, it also attracted criticism for its sensational descriptions and violence. The exacting portrayal of everyday life of the new tendency literature was criticized for being more “naturalist” than realist in focusing on the vicissitudes of fortune and impersonal social forces beyond the character’s control. In particular, KAPF critics targeted Ch’oe’s narratives as being “naturalist” departures from the proletarian narrative form, and in 1927, Pak Yŏng-hui called for a break from new tendency style, calling it “futile, full of despair and individualistic.” Pak argued that the proletarian movement was not about individual revenge but about class revolution. And as the movement progressed in the late 1920s, there were stringent calls for more-formal prescriptions of the form and content of proletarian literature to enforce ideological consistency. These discussions, however, exacerbated divisions among members of KAPF, who argued for the value of different literary qualities.

These divisions often hinged on the urgent question of Chosŏn independence and the prioritization of class over nation. This debate came to a head in 1927, with members of KAPF favoring national interests, helping to form the New Korea Society (Sin’ganhoe). This was a leading organization focusing on Korean independence with the goal, among others, of uniting parties that had previously acted separately: the nationalists who simply wanted Korea to gain its independence from Japan and the socialists who believed that the worldwide proletarian movement was a way for Korea to achieve this. One outcome of the creation of the New Korea Society, representative of a new effort to unite for Korean independence, was that KAPF leaders began to reconsider their role and formal political position in the socialist movement and their ineffectual efforts to incite social change through their literary production.

Pak Yŏng-hui’s “The Ideological Shift of the Art Movement” (Munye undong panghyang chŏnhwan) reflects this “shift” in the KAPF movement, as it asks writers to write with renewed “purposeful political consciousness” from the foundation of “class relations.” Despite authors during the mid-1920s having focused on the material conditions of the proletarian class, Pak urged a reconsideration of literary creation, asking them to create literature that was more politically centered and focused on advancing the proletarian revolution. This “shift” was not fully embraced by other members of KAPF, who continued to maintain that literary forms that appealed to mass readership were key. In The Tonga Daily in February–March 1929, Kim Kijin, for example, writes about the importance of the popular fiction form in “On Popular Literature” (taejung sosollon) and the significance of the rise of popular novels (t’ongsok sosŏl). While Pak insists that proletarian and bourgeois literary forms are diametrically opposed, Kim concedes the value of other forms of popular culture and blurs the lines between “bourgeois and proletarian literature,” arguing that both are useful insofar as they appeal to a mass readership. This issue revealed the two leaders’ opposing principles in relation to the treatment of the proletarian literary form. Pak above all maintains that the political purpose of the writer should be central to the work and considers romanticism, sentimentality, and naturalist literary tendencies as “entertainment” that lacks the critical social perspective crucial to proletarian consciousness.

This division between Kim and Pak would be revisited throughout KAPF’s development in the latter half of the 1920s and their discussions of form and content addressed many foundational issues of the proletarian culture movement and the application of Marxism in 1920s and 1930s Korea. On a broader level, this discussion revealed the centrality of literary representation to class politics. KAPF intellectuals believed that proletarian literature was fundamental to the political movement, because Karl Marx had maintained that artistic literature was a powerful tool of the “ruling classes.” Issues of form and content revealed fundamental arguments over artistic literature as one significant battlefield in the class war; stylistic features were seen as expressive of support for or in opposition to “bourgeois” hegemony. On a local level, this division also revealed the contradictory “international” aspect of Marxism. KAPF critics were
conscious of the importation of ideas and literary forms through the Japanese translation of texts. Kim Kijin had this problem of Marxism and the Korean context in mind in 1929, when he discussed the problematic “importation” of Marxist ideology, which he said is essentially “foreign to Chosŏn laborers and peasants.” Kim was first and foremost concerned with how to garner mass interest, a concern that spurred him to champion “bourgeois” literary forms. The tension between ideological purity and a pragmatic approach to building a mass movement was never resolved within the KAPF.

KAPF had formed the leftist cultural front, while the Korean Communist Party, which was founded in 1925, aligned with the international communist movement and the Comintern. Beyond the discourse among the left-leaning intellectuals leading the proletarian culture movement, Marxist ideology had gained popularity in mass culture and introduced a new language about class. In his study on socialist cartoons, Lee Seung-hee cites a 1925 column in which a reporter teaches his readers the new, fashionable vocabulary. Interestingly, one-third of these buzzwords were derivative of, or influenced by, the spread of Marxism: “social movement” (sahoe undong), “labor and agrarian movement” (nodong undong, nongch’ŏn undong), the “people” (minjung), “proletariat” (musan kyeŏgp’ŭp), “liberation” (haebang), and “class struggle” (kyeŏgp t’ujaeng) were among the twenty-two terms, reflecting the reality that leftist jargon was becoming increasingly commonplace in mass culture.

Marxism also attracted many intellectuals who did not fully fall in line behind the politics of the KAPF leaders. There were many writers who sympathized with the proletarian literary movement but who did not completely subscribe to the political directives of the KAPF leaders and did not choose to be formally associated with the group. These were often labeled “fellow travelers” (tongbanja chakka) of the proletarian literary movement, being writers who incorporated components of Marxist ideology and the leftist writing style into their work to varying degrees. Many, such as Yŏm Sangsŏp, Yi Hyosŏk, and Ch’ae Mansik, were leading figures in the left-leaning literary activity of the 1920s and 1930s, but the canonical history of Korean literature rarely mentions their participation in the propagation of lower-class representations. Yŏm in particular was a self-professed sympathizer of socialism, and his class focus in works like “On the Eve of the Uprising” (Mansejŏn, 1924) and Three Generations (Samdae, 1931) betrays his interests in anarchism, socialism, and realism. Although many of Yŏm’s main characters, like the Korean student Yi Inhwa in “On the Eve of the Uprising,” do not belong to the peasant class, typically being intellectuals in the imperial metropole, Yŏm’s insightful descriptions of poverty, criticism of capitalism, and commitment to realistic portraits of everyday life align his works with the literary left.

As the communist movement, alliances among nationalist groups within the New Korea Society (Sin’ghanhoe), and peasant and labor groups gained more ground in the late 1920s, the colonial police became increasingly watchful of nationalist and socialist gatherings. The pressure that resulted from the concentrated surveillance affected the momentum of the proletarian culture movement. Beginning in the late 1920s and continuing into the 1930s, a series of mass arrests (kŏmgŏ sagŏn) targeted suspected members of the Korean Communist party. February 1928 saw the first mass arrests of the members of KAPF, and although the majority of members were released, the group’s progress stalled.

Although KAPF was reorganized after each mass arrest, during the arrests in 1931, the Japanese police were able to procure a “detailed account of the policies, activities, and personnel involved in the Federation,” greatly hampering the group’s operation. Many scholars suspect that the mass arrests in 1931 and 1934 of KAPF members permanently altered the foundational discourse of the proletarian culture movement. The arrests were followed by internal shifts in the KAPF hierarchy, and the regrouping in 1932 took place under the leadership of Kim Ch’angsul,
Kimberly Chung

Im hwa, An Mak, Kwŏn Hwan, and Pak Seyŏng, while the former leaders, Pak Yŏnghŭi and Kim Kijin, were retired.20

This change represented a watershed in the development of ideological prescriptions for proletarian literature. With growing numbers of peasants and laborers emerging as independent forces and being acknowledged as a formidable political presence,21 literary production followed suit, focusing on channeling authentic experiences and producing accurate depictions of laborers in factories, harbors, and mines and peasants in farming villages. In “The Problem of Form in Proletarian Art” (P’ūroyser ŭi hyŏngsik munje), published in Light of Korea in June 1930, An Mak calls for a stringent implementation of socialist doctrine and ideology as the foundation of proletarian literature, a turn termed as a move toward Bolshevism. Led by KAPF critics An Mak, Im hwa, and Kwŏn Hwan, there was a renewed effort to articulate the materialist foundations that had become stressed during a deepening economic crisis due to the worldwide Great Depression, rising unemployment and impoverishment in rural and urban areas, and tenant and labor disputes.22 As a result, the proletarian literature of the 1930s laid bare the ills of colonial industrialization through the vivid descriptions of factory laborers and of the peasants who worked in the tenant farming system and who consequently felt the strain on production in the countryside.

Although narratives centering on factory laborers had remained a consistent focus in proletarian literature, going into the 1930s, a stronger emphasis was placed on agrarian literature and the figure of the revolutionary peasant. This stemmed in part from the 1929 December Theses, in which the Comintern called for the Korean Communist Party to increase its focus on tenant and semitenant farmers. KAPF leaders responded in turn, focusing on the revolutionizing potential of the agrarian peasant; the aim was to create a literature that would resonate with their discontent and awaken their souls to the movement.23 Another, more pressing reason was that the problems in the rural areas had begun to figure more prominently. In the 1930s, there was a great deal of reporting on poverty in the rural areas of colonial Korea, which drew the attention of the public to the suffering of the peasants. In response, the colonial government in 1931 initiated a series of construction projects of infrastructure such as railroads, dams, roads, and rural facilities to alleviate the poverty in the countryside. The colonial government saw these relief efforts, which lasted through 1935, as a two-fold solution to the depression across the empire. Not only did they hope that the projects would improve material conditions for tenant farmers and lead to increased food production, but they also hoped that they would provide jobs for increasing numbers of itinerant laborers. A move to prevent the emigration of the Korean poor, the projects were seen as the colonial government’s blanket solution to the problem of the economic depression in Korea and in Japan.

Even writers “outside” leftist circles were taking note of the worsening conditions. Kim Yuŏng, a member of the modernist literary group Group of Nine (Kuinhoe) whose works often feature rural settings and local color, documented the problems in his essay “The One Who Leaves in Spring” (Ip’i p’urŏ p’asidŏn nim):24

The other day my friend told me that he misses the quiet countryside. He is a sickly poet who has grown tired of the city life. However, I think maybe he just wants to be liberated from dogged conservative people. . . . The country is not such a beautiful, quiet place. . . . Seoul people yearn for the countryside where there are mountains, rice, and blooming grass, the sorrowful poetics of a monotonous dream. At that same moment there is a country bumpkin who yearns to come to Seoul where the money flows, and there is everything.
Kim here illustrates the contradiction between the poetic perception of the country and the material reality of the peasants, who long to escape rural poverty. He reiterates throughout the text that the country is a place of despair rather than of rich harvest: “Decaying countryside, starving peasant. We all agree that this is not a new statement but what we know is that the country people do not have any food. The city person cannot understand the feeling of starvation.” In this excerpt, Kim notes the ironies of the peasant who toils and harvests the crops but does not have access to food. The peasant who is now a farm laborer or tenant farmer and therefore alienated from the fruits of their production becomes a poignant and consistent representation of the exploitation under colonial capitalism in the 1930s.

Proletarian writers also responded to the ideological shift by increasing their focus on agrarian society and life. Although agrarian life does figure prominently as the backdrop in sentimental narratives about peasant enlightenment and return-to-the-farm novels like Sim Hun’s The Evergreen (Sanguksu, 1936) and Yi Kwangsu’s The Soil (Hūk, 1932–3), agrarian works by cultural nationalist writers brought the agrarian space to the fore to promote the rural enlightenment campaign (nongch’on kyemong undong). For its part, proletarian agrarian literature, like the agrarian works by cultural nationalist writers, is marked by detailed descriptions of the everyday life of peasants; where it departs from the cultural nationalist representation of agrarian life is in presenting a blunt criticism of the social structures that are foundational to class marginalization.

Yi Kiyoṅg was a representative writer of proletarian agrarian fiction, and while he had produced many notable works, such as “Village” (Minch’on, 1925) and “A Tale of Rats” (Chwi iyagi, 1926) in the 1920s, his works in the 1930s were especially lauded as exemplary. Yi Kiyoṅg’s critically well-received Hometown (Kohyang, 1933–4) was representative of this shift, chronicling the commonplace working life of a rural village. Through this agrarian microcosm, Yi both captures the minute details of the farmers’ day-to-day struggles and delineates the social processes that foreground their impoverishment: the landlords, both domestic and colonial, and the economic system make it hard for farmers to make a living, forcing them to become tenant farmers and farm laborers and their family members to seek jobs in nearby factories. When work cannot be found, Yi documents how these social disparities lead peasants to emigrate to Manchuria, Japan, and China in search of farmland and other work opportunities. Toward the end of the novel, a strike is organized among the peasants and laborers, a compelling representation of the mobilization of a proletariat class of united laborers and peasants.

One result of the focus on authenticity and agrarian literature was that many writers documented the emigration of itinerant peasants to China, Japan, and Manchuria, places that Korean peasants thought were lands of opportunity. Although Korean emigration to Manchuria had been ongoing since the late nineteenth century, that destination in particular from the 1910s on loomed large in the imaginations of Korean peasants as an ideal place of not only free farmland and work but also freedom from colonial oppression. The colonial government’s stance regarding the movement of peasants to Manchuria varied. In the 1910s, peasants who left were negatively portrayed in print culture, but as the Japanese imperial government became more serious about expansion into Manchuria—and especially after its invasion of the region in 1931—the occupation of Manchuria through the settlement of Korean colonial citizens was encouraged in the government-general’s official discourse.

In this context of forced globalization, “internationalism” (segyehwa) was brought to the forefront of discussions about the formal standards for socialist realism. Marx had argued that ending the exploitation of the working class in national contexts was essential, but a revolution against global capitalist forces demanded international solidarity among proletarian classes under different national apparatuses. An Mak, in a series of columns for The Chosŏn Daily (Chosŏn ilbo)
in 1934, addresses the issues of how to construct this internationalism through the form and content of proletarian literature—and the impossibilities of internationalism in the Korean context. For colonial writers, An Mak argues that internationalism is a departure from “mirror of life” (insaeng ūi kŏul) writing and contains a problematic fictional core that would undermine the real depiction of social circumstances. An Mak concludes that only with direct knowledge and experience of internationalism can a writer compose an accurate depiction of this vision and resolve this problem.28

Although literary criticism and literary dialogue were suffering from censorship under the increasingly watchful eye of the Japanese colonial government, the literary portrayal of emigration was inspired. In the 1930s, Manchuria and the northern borderlands became the most common destinations for increasing numbers of diasporic Korean peasants. In their documentation of this movement, writers varied widely in how they presented Manchuria and the northern borderlands; it was the background for a range of depictions. At times, it was an unforgiving land of struggle and tensions between Chinese settlers and Korean settlers, at others an idyllic utopia of pan-Asian cooperation; for modernist writers who documented their visits in travelogues, it was a place for introspection and provided inspiration for fictional works. Yi Hysŏk’s trip to the city of Harbin, about which he wrote in “News from Northern Manchuria” (Pungmanju sosik, 1939), became the inspiration for the novel The Boundless Blue Sky (Pyŏkkong muhan, 1940) and the short story “Harbin” (1940), and Yi T’aejun’s experiences as narrated in “Record of a Journey to Manchuria” (Manju Kihaeng, 1938) provided the basis for the short story “Farm Laborer” (Nonggum, 1939).

In the proletarian literature on emigration, the northern territories were a complex site, being featured predominantly in frontier narratives that describe the space as the edge of the world, a border region of civilization. Female socialist writers like Kang Kyŏngae and Paek Sinae used their experiences of travel in this region to portray the itinerancy and hardships of the lives of diasporic Korean peasants with intimate understanding. In these narratives, Manchuria, Siberia, and northern China are at once unstable spaces rife with conflict and expansion and a gateway to a proletarian awakening. In both Kang Kyŏngae’s Salt (Sogŭm 1934) and Paek Sinae’s The Koreans of Russia (Kkŏraci, 1933),29 the female main character finds herself by undergoing a series of harrowing ordeals and through these experiences of exploitation finds her voice as an individual and simultaneously is awakened to her class and social marginalization. In Paek’s narrative, a hodgepodge group of travelers becomes united by its members’ circumstances, ethnic differences are pushed aside, and Suni, the female main character, becomes a class-conscious leader of the group. Even after the dissolution of KAPF, Manchuria continued to be integral to Korean literary production and the leftist imagination. Important novels such as Yi Kiyŏng’s Son of the Earth (Taeji ūi adŭl, 1939–40) and Virgin Land (Ch’ŏnyŏjŏ, 1944) depicted the hardships, hopes, and sentiments of Korean pioneers in the northern region.30

While KAPF was officially disbanded in 1935 due to the colonial regime’s increasingly stringent censorship, some scholars describe KAPF’s end as a gradual process, and they have argued that the ideological “conversions” of KAPF intellectuals were the cause of the demise of the group. The most famous of these was Pak Yŏnghui’s renunciation of socialist ideology, since he had been prominent in the leadership of KAPF from its beginnings. Pak released a statement that appeared in a series of articles published in The Tonga Daily from January 2 to 11, 1934, in which he addresses the failure of KAPF and declares, “Although ideology was gained, what was lost is art.” Pak describes the development of proletarian literature after 1927 as the gradual submission of art to the rule of politics, arguing that the leftist intellectuals’ “uncritical” acceptance of socialist party ideology had been “the creation of their own chains.”31
Proletarian realities and leftist literature

The scholarship on this period speaks of the ideological changes that occurred during the 1930s with the terms conversion (chŏnhyang), pro-Japanese (ch’inil), and surface conversion (uwang chŏnhyang) in narrating the respective processes of socialist intellectuals’ repudiations of leftist. This turn must be viewed in the context of the effort by the Japanese imperial state to create a “new culture” (sinmunhwaj) that reflected the “naise nittai” policy, which reorganized Japanese and Koreans into “one body.”32 The Japanese authorities did not consider leftist ideology compatible with the “new culture,” and government pressure led to the conversions (tenkŏ) of Japanese socialists. This loss of an ideological “center,” the relentless mass arrests that undermined the movement, and the increasing surveillance and targeting of communists by the government-general have all been cited by scholars to account for the conversions of KAPF members.33 Another common argument interprets the conversions as reflecting the natural progression from an ideological reliance on Russia and Japan to the concern with defending Chosŏn identity (Chosŏn t’ŏksusŏng) as the weight of imperial subjuecthood grew heavier.34

Although the “conversions” marked the end of the group’s activities and the loss of the ideological apparatus for the proletarian culture movement, leftist literary production did continue into the early 1940s in the years leading up to the Asia–Pacific War. But although Japanese colonial policy had allowed leftist culture to flourish, it also played a decisive role in its end. While it is tempting to judge KAPF members for not continuing to resist, it must be acknowledged that in the course of a mere two decades, the proletarian culture movement produced a rich collection of texts of remarkable social and artistic significance. The goals of the leaders of the proletarian culture movement were to spark class consciousness and challenge oppressive class relations, and although these outcomes were not realized, the movement did offer alternative representations of Korean society by focusing on lower-class realities in a way that was unprecedented.

Notes
1 Heather Bowen-Struyk and Norma Field use the phrase “red decade” in their anthology of Japanese proletarian literature For Dignity, Justice and Revolution to describe the international aspect of the leftist cultural movement. This term is useful in drawing connections among localized proletarian cultural movements and the transnational momentum of the leftist arts.
2 The All Japan Federation of Proletarian Arts is also known as NAPE, which is the acronym for its Esperanto name: Nippona Artist Proleta Federacio. The Japan Proletarian Cultural Federation is also known as KOPF, which is the acronym for its Esperanto name: Federacio de Proletaj Kultur-Organizoj Japanaj. See Mats Karlsson’s article “United Front from Below: The Proletarian Cultural Movement’s Last Stand, 1931–1934” for a detailed illustration of this shift during the Japanese proletarian culture movement.
3 The critique of bourgeois literature and art for art’s sake was adopted at the time by leading critics of KAPF. Although “art for art’s sake” was not a popular phrase with writers considered to be “bourgeois,” proletarian critics like Kim Kijin polarized cultural production, recasting literary production along class lines with the oppositional framework of “bourgeois literature” and “proletarian literature.” Travis Workman, in his book Imperial Genus: The Formation and Limits of the Human in Modern Korea and Japan, describes the “manufactur[ing] of class” in the development of the subject through “Marxist philosophy and social science.” Workman, “Labor and Bildung in Marxism and the Proletarian Arts,” 101.
5 Gragert, Landownership under Colonial Rule, 151.
6 Kim, “P’it’usŏngi toen p’ŭro hon ŭi p’yobaek,” 198.
7 Pak Yŏnghŭi, “Munhaksang kongmjŏk kach’i yŏha,” 205.
8 For more on the representation of the proletarian body, see Chung, “Proletarian Sensibilities.”
9 Son Yŏng, in her book Pi’umunhak ŭi kamsong kujo [Structure of Sensibility in Korean Proletarian Literature], has highlighted the ways proletarian writers, in particular Kim Kijin, outlined a new kind of sensibility around “misery, pain and distress.” Son argues that Kim introduces an aesthetics around grief that leads to pathos through moving portraits of suffering that appeal to the reader’s emotions. Although this reading draws an interesting connection to aesthetics, the term pathos does not address
the representations of bodies and their capacity to affect, be affected by, and depart from interiority, which I maintain are the most important interventions of proletarian fiction.

10 Literary critics admitted to the lack of clear distinctions among literary tendencies, with some writers considered to be leaning toward realism and others toward naturalism. Pak labeled Ch’oe’s work as “naturalist” because of the focus on the sensational downfall of the protagonist under structures of corruption.

11 Pak Yŏng-hŭi, “T’uaenggi e innun munye pip’yŏngga úi t’aedo.”


14 In “Chayŏn ch’uui esŏ sinisang ch’uui ku而是ınım Chŏson munand úi ch’ŏegŭn kyŏnghyang” (Chosŏn literary worlds’ Latest Tendency to Slant from Naturalism to Neo-idealism), Pak points out the problematic importation of foreign literary tendencies and thought through Japan translations.

15 Kim, “Nongmin munye e taehan ch’o’an.”

16 Lee, “1920 nyŏndaesinnun manp’yŏng úi sahoe ch’uui chŏngch’i’” 82.

17 Sin’gahoe, otherwise known as New Korea Society, was launched on February 15, 1927, and was meant to be a nationalist–communist alliance. From the outset, however, it was clear that it leaned toward “accommodating a leftist front.” See Scalapino and Lee, Communism in Korea, 105.

18 Ibid, 122.

19 Ibid.

20 Kwŏn, “Che 2 ch’a panghyang chŏnhwan sidae úi k’ap’ŭ chojik,” 283.

21 Scalapino and Lee, Communism in Korea, 105.

22 Kwŏn, “Che 2 ch’a panghyang chŏnhwan sidae úi k’ap’ŭ chojik,” 283.

23 The Comintern’s “December Thesis” ordered the Korean Communist Party to focus on landed peasants and tenant farmers. Scholarship differs on how significant this was to the reorganization of the Korean Communist Party, but most scholars agree that one important result was the increase in the production of agrarian literature. See Shin, Peasant Protest and Social Change in Colonial Korea.


25 Ibid.

26 In Yi Mi-yongjong’s study of the number of Korean emigrants to Manchuria, Lee documents that there were sharp increases of emigration before and after the March First Movement and the June 10 independence movement in 1926, drawing correlations between mass discontent and emigration.

27 Yi Mi-yongjong, “1910 nyŏndaesŏ Chosŏn nongmin úi Manju iju,” 139.


29 See Sun-young Park’s The Proletarian Wave for an important gendered reading of Kang Kyŏngae’s Salt.

30 See Naoki Watanabe’s “‘Singminji Chosŏn úi p’urollet’aria nongmin munhak kwa ‘Manju’” for a study of literary representations of migration to Manchuria in the late 1930s and early 1940s.

31 Pak Yŏng-hŭi, “Munhak úi saeroun kwaje,” 156.

32 Historians such as Leo Ching have described the change from cultural rule to total rule as doka (or imperialization), otherwise known as the change in assimilation policy during cultural rule to the kominka policy in the 1930s, which involved the increased internal surveillance and interiorization of Japanese imperialization.

33 See scholarship by Kim Chaeyoung, Kim Yunsik, and Kwŏn Yŏngmin for their respective arguments about and details of the conversion of socialist intellectuals in the 1930s.

34 See Kim Chaeyoung for a detailed argument about the recantation process of KAPF members and their ideological vacillation between internationalism and nationalism in the 1930s.

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