

Red Capital, Colonial Eyes: Moscow as Seen by Korean Intellectuals in the 1920s–1930s*

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Abstract

In the 1920s and 1930s, Moscow occupied an important place on the Korean intelligentsia's cognitive maps. For the communists, studying at Comintern schools there was a cherished dream. Approximately two hundred Korean communists either studied or taught in Moscow throughout the 1920s and 1930s. For the noncommunist anti-colonial progressives too, Moscow was the place to observe a fascinating sociopolitical experiment. For them, Moscow symbolized social emancipation of the erstwhile oppressed classes, female liberation, and efforts to enlighten the "masses," which they regarded as needed in Korea as well. Interestingly enough, the conservative Stalinist turn in internal Soviet politics from the early 1930s was duly registered in Moscow travelogues by Korean intellectuals as well. Social levelling was still seen as an important defining trait of the Soviet experience, but at the same time close attention was increasingly paid to rapid industrial and military development. Drawing on a large number of colonial-age materials, the present article attempts to reconstruct the diverse overlapping images of Moscow in Korea under Japanese rule. It focuses on the complex interactions between diverse images of the city which embodied, for Koreans as well as other foreign visitors, all the essential features of the Soviet sociopolitical and cultural experiment.

Keywords: Moscow, Soviet Union, communism, egalitarianism, travelogue, colonial period, development

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Introduction: Moscow Travelogues between Literature and Politics

As the “Soviet experiment” captivated worldwide attention in the 1920–1930s, Moscow travelogues grew into a special subgenre, placed somewhere on the boundary between travel literature and political writing. Salutary impressions from Moscow during the most tragic periods of Stalinist repression were often regarded as a hallmark of an authentic “progressive writer” in the left-wing circles of prewar Europe. A typical case is Lion Feuchtwanger’s (1884–1958) somewhat notorious *Moskau 1937*, which, inter alia, contained an explicitly apologetic description of the Moscow Trials. At the same time, they were typically criticized during and after the Cold War either for naiveté or for gross neglect of the truth, hardly justifiable even in the name of an antifascist strategic alignment with the USSR. By contrast, more analytical and critical accounts—such as André Gide’s (1869–1951) *Retour de l’U.R.S.S* (1936)—could be vilified by some contemporaneous pro-Moscow zealots while praised by later critics for their acute penetration into the details of Stalinist Russia’s de facto conservative turn in the 1930s. The narratives of the type presented by Feuchtwanger’s and Gide’s accounts placed Soviet society into a critical relationship with European intelligentsia’s emancipatory ideals, attempting to determine to what degree the “Soviet experiment” contributed to the liberation of humanity, as it was understood by capitalism’s critics in the core regions of the world capitalist system.¹ Much less attention in the Anglophone scholarship has been paid so far to Moscow travelogues by intellectuals from the colonized peripheral areas of the world-system. These intellectuals, naturally enough, tended to assess the changes they witnessed in the Soviet capital in relationship to their own historical aspirations—first and foremost, the aim of liberation from colonialism and “latecomer” modernity development. Some academic writings can be found on the Soviet experiences of the Indian² or Chinese³ luminaries, while colonial-era Korean travelogues on Soviet Russia’s capital

1. See a comparison of the two narratives in Hartmann (2011).

2. Indian pilgrimages to the USSR by Jawaharlal Nehru and Rabindranath Tagore, as well as their travel writings on Soviet Russia, are dealt with in Vaidyanath (1969).

3. See Hsia (1966) on the Moscow sojourn of Qu Qiubai 瞿秋白.

remain largely unexplored in the English-language scholarship. This article is intended to fill the niche, by attempting to analyze the angle from which Korean observers tended to view Moscow in the 1920–1930s. While travelogues generally tend to be heavy on exoticism and often represent a projection of their authors' views onto the lesser-known realities of faraway destinations,⁴ they often also offer outsiders' perspectives, which are indispensable for post factum historical reconstructions of past facts. As this article will demonstrate, Koreans' impressions of Moscow not only reflected their own agenda, but also pointed to some very essential features of Soviet developments in the 1920–1930s and, in this aspect, are relevant for specialists outside of the narrow field of Korean studies as well.

The Metamorphoses of Moscow: 1896 to 1937

In the year 1937, when Maritime Province Koreans, accused of being “Japanese spies” en masse, were forcibly moved to Central Asia amidst the hurried preparations for a military showdown with Japan along the Soviet border with Japan's Korean colony (known as the “Battle of Lake Khasan,” it eventually came in July 1938), an anonymous correspondent from a popular monthly, *Jogwang* 朝光, interviewed Yun Chi-ho (1865–1945), one of the key conservative leaders of colonial society, about his experience of travelling to Russia in 1896. At that time Yun Chi-ho, one of the most fluent English speakers in the officialdom of a still independent Korean monarchy, was appointed as an interpreter of the Korean mission sent to the coronation festivities of Russia's (last) Tsar Nikolas II (r. 1894–1917). Asked about his impressions of Moscow—where the coronation festivities took place—Yun vividly remembered the luxury of the festival decorations, and the extravagance of the coronation hall, decorated in gold and silver. It was as if the Russian Empire was to show off all its prosperity and splendor in the coronation city, Yun assumed. Yet at the same time, “a giant stampede killed more than two thousand people, and nobody paid any attention” (Anony-

4. On the preconceived nature of many travel observations, see Huang (2002, 1–7).

mous 1937).

The Russian capital here appears to be a two-faced Janus—the extravaganza of the pompous imperial coronation is juxtaposed with the enormity of the Khodynka tragedy where negligence and unskilled administration ended up in a crowd-rush and the death of circa 1,400 (rather than “2,000”), mostly lower-class, participants in the festivities. Ambivalence of this kind also characterized Yun Chi-ho’s very first impressions of Moscow. While in Moscow, he confided to his English diary that the hospitality of his imperial hosts was impeccable—“good fare, clean beds, cool drinks, efficient service, fine carriages” were all to the service of the Korean envoys. The wonders of Russia’s old capital, to which the envoys were treated, were superb. The military parade Yun and his fellow delegates were invited to observe was “magnificent as regiment after regiment of well-equipped soldiers—infantry, artillery, and cavalry—passed by in superb order marching to the lively notes of the martial music.”⁵ At the same time, the streets in this city of church domes and palaces were “very rough—so full of big gravel, with which the streets are paved. Sidewalks are narrow and sometimes a strip of sidewalk is in the middle of the road.”⁶ Why could the Tsar not use the money wasted on coronation festivities, for paving at least the main arteries of his ancient capital with asphalt?⁷ Obviously, Moscow was a place of contrasts—the most salient of which was that between imperial ostentation and the Russian absolutism’s blatant disregard for the well-being of its poor subjects.

Thirty-eight years later, a certain Kim Hae-chun (1934)—who presented himself in his text as a Korean student in Moscow, now the Soviet capital—sent his essay on Tolstoy’s *Resurrection* performed by Moscow’s Khudozhestvennyi Theater to a commercial monthly with considerable, albeit avowedly nonpolitical, interest in Russian culture and Soviet realities, *Samcheolli* 三千里.⁸ The performance, as he explained, was to open the eyes of the public to the dark side of prerevolutionary Russian life, with its philandering aristocrats, poor, suffering women reduced to selling their bodies,

5. Yun ([1883–1943] 1973–1989, 4: 205–206), June 7, 1896.

6. Yun ([1883–1943] 1973–1989, 4: 183), May 23, 1896.

7. Yun ([1883–1943] 1973–1989, 4: 200), June 4, 1896.

8. On *Samcheolli* attitudes vis-à-vis Soviet Russia, see Jang (2008).

and the horrors of Siberian prison life. Otherwise, Tolstoy's religious moralism had little appeal for the new, Soviet public. And, importantly, the public now in large part consisted of the workers, men and women, in their characteristic *rubashkas* (cheaper Russian shirts). At last, the contrast between the magnificence of Moscow's artistic aura and pitiable fates of the poorer Muscovites, was, to a degree, overcome. Revolution had drastically changed the erstwhile image of Moscow.

Some of the noteworthy changes—from the viewpoint of Korean observers—happened in the sphere of gender relations. Communist observers used to express their admiration for the Soviet system of maternity protection and socialized childcare, which was supposed to enable women to combine motherhood with self-realization in the workplace.⁹ However, a high degree of appreciation for the steps taken towards gender equality in Soviet Russia was by no means limited to the communists.¹⁰ At a round-table discussion between several Koreans with long-term Russian sojourn experience held by the *Samcheolli* editorial office in 1935, it was mentioned that in prerevolutionary Moscow, such central streets as Tverskaya or Petrovka were “heaven” for the throngs of yellow-ticketed, often under-age prostitutes. The Soviet authorities, however, were reported to have removed them from the streets, building instead special facilities for rehabilitation and professional training of former sex workers (D. Yi et al. 1935a).

There were, indeed, even some Korean eye-witnesses for the post-revolutionary crackdown on prostitution. In 1936, a certain Kim Seo-sam,¹¹ then a Petrograd Conservatoire student, witnessed hundreds of “café girls” being apprehended and carted away to the rehabilitation facilities in post-revolutionary Petrograd. From the vantage point of colonial-age Korea, with its highly exploitive system of de facto indentured slavery at the licensed

9. See Cheolbu (1933), an article in the leftist monthly journal, *Singyedan* 新階段, mostly based on Anglophone and Japanese sources, by a journalist using the pseudonym Cheolbu.

10. On a more general positive appraisal of the new Soviet systems of maternity protection and childcare, see Hwang (2009, 204).

11. He was identified in current scholarship as Kim Dong-han, a Soviet-educated music and dance teacher who worked as Korean-Russian interpreter for the Soviet Consulate in Gyeongseong in 1925–1938 (see H. Cha 2016).

brothels (Song 1997), such changes looked indeed epochal. A Korean reader of such translated Russian works as Leo Tolstoi's *Resurrection*¹² or Maxim Gorky's short story "Boles" (Her Lover)¹³ knew very well that police-supervised prostitution was a fixture of Tsarist Russia's daily life; from then on, however, trade in women was no longer a defining trait of Moscow.

At the same round-table discussion, yet another change in gender roles was mentioned. Female nudity became more accepted in certain public spaces—informally, some of the beaches along the Moscow River were turned into female-only nudist bathing spaces. The discussion participants related this change to the unprecedented penetration of mass sports into the masses, males and females alike. While sportive fashions underpinned the tendency towards more extensive exposure of trained, healthy female bodies, the popular mood was also boosted by the newly established tradition of mass festivities on May 1 (Labour Day) and November 7 (Revolution Day). Korean observers witnessed crowds cheerfully dancing under the accompaniment of ubiquitous accordions. The positive mood was also maintained by the release of *Vesyolye rebyata* (Merry Fellows) (1934), the pioneering Soviet comedy film which seemingly impressed Korean observers of Russian life (D. Yi et al. 1935a).

What could explain the ebullience of the Moscow crowds? The participants of the *Samcheolli* round-table discussion emphasized the fast path of 1930s' industrial development which was quickly changing Moscow's cityscape. As if following Yun Chi-ho's suggestion, confessed to his diary thirty-nine years earlier, the central streets of Moscow were all now asphalted. The tempo was a matter of surprise—asphalting Tverskaya, the main thoroughfare of the city, took less than two days! Cars displaced the horses, and the brand-new Moscow metro, with its marble-decorated entrances—"more impressive than anything one could ever see in the United States"—overawed the Korean guests. Trolleybuses were yet another Moscow novelty that one could find no analogues for in either Korea or its colonial metropole

12. The first translation in abridged form was made by Choe Nam-seon in 1914 and an adopted translation by Bak Hyeon-hwan was published in 1918 (see Tikhonov 2016, 55).

13. The Russian original was published in 1897. Jin Hak-mun's adopted translation into Korean was published in 1922 (see Jin 1922; J. Kim 2015, 10).

of Japan. As one of the discussion participants put it, in prerevolutionary Russia modern clothes implied a very special social position above an ordinary level. Now, modernism became daily life for the masses (D. Yi et al. 1935b).

From Revolutionary Zeal to the New Normalcy

But then, what happened to the revolution—a watershed event that changed Moscow beyond recognition? Korean publications of mid- or late 1930s represent Soviet Moscow as a postrevolutionary, rather than revolutionary society. In the round-table discussion cited above, for example, the new class stratification in postrevolutionary Moscow was mentioned in a matter-of-fact, natural way. That the women, whom one could meet in Moscow’s hotels or other elite venues for socialization, were dressed in a “high-collar”¹⁴ manner, unlike the Soviet women of lesser standing, was stated as a fact not requiring special explanation. Of course, it was also mentioned that the attire of those gathering to dance in Moscow’s poshest hotel, Metropole, was hardly comparable with the fashionable clothes to be seen in Tokyo’s Imperial (Teikoku 帝國) Hotel or in the prominent social venues of New York. Still, the contrast between the relative luxury of the outfits of the female socialites in Moscow’s theaters, hotels or dance halls, and the still “modest” clothing of the majority of Soviet women, including ordinary party members, was taken more or less for granted (D. Yi et al. 1935b). The changes for the better in Soviet Moscow—which Korean observers obviously admired—were explained in the developmentalist terms of “cultural level” (*munhwa jeongdo*) improvement rather than being related to the revolution’s equalitarian impulses. These observations stand in stark contrast with Korean travelers’ accounts of the Soviet capital’s early days, which first and foremost foregrounded the revolutionary zeal.

14. In Japanese and colonial-age Korean usage, this loanword could also denote stylishness or smartness of dressing.

Yeo Un-hyeong (1886–1947), a former communist who, since the late 1920s, moved to positions more akin to middle-of-the-way social democracy, described in a memoirist piece (published in 1936) the Soviet Moscow which he visited in 1922 as a locus of revolutionary heroism. Moscow’s communists—as he saw them—were secular ascetics sacrificing themselves to save their country, which had been almost completely destroyed by eight-nine years of continuous warfare. Drinking was strictly prohibited for all citizens, and could be punished by death on the spot. Moscow’s “semi-Asiatic” beauty, its churches and old streets captivated Yeo; but the atmosphere of revolutionary passion was what he remembered best after fourteen years. The scene which remained preserved in his memory was Leon Trotsky’s speech at a ceremony when he, as Soviet War Minister (“People’s Commissar for Military and Naval Affairs”), was presented a gift of weapons by Outer Mongolian delegates to the First Congress of the Toilers of the Far East, which Yeo himself was attending. The speech, initially meant to last for half an hour at most, ended up continuing for a couple of hours. It electrified the audience so strongly that the listeners started to spontaneously applaud and shouted approvingly as Trotsky was speaking. The speech mesmerized the Russian comrade who was asked to interpret it for Yeo (into English, which Yeo was fluent in) to the degree that he did not interpret a single word while Trotsky spoke, instead trying hard to discern each word uttered by the great revolutionary amidst the shouting, cheering and applause. It was only on the way back to Congress delegates’ residence that Yeo could at last understand the gist of the speech. One did not need to speak Russian, however, to appreciate Trotsky’s oratorical talents; and it was memories of the crucible of revolutionary fervor, in which such talents were so much appreciated, that constituted the main content of Yeo’s Moscow impressions (Yeo 1991, 70–74).

By 1925, when *Dong-A Ilbo*’s first Moscow correspondent, Yi Gwan-yong (1894–1933), came to report on Russia’s revolutionary capital, Trotsky was, in practical terms, pushed away from real power: the peak of radical ardor was already in the past. Still, the visible egalitarianism of new Moscow was nevertheless catching the eye of the Korean visitor. Amidst the discomforts of life in a city of overcrowded street cars, chaotic hordes of street

peddlers and throngs of beggars (including many small homeless children), Soviet elections gave voting rights to both women and men—in contrast to Japan proper, where 1925 saw the introduction of the universal franchise for Japanese males only. Even the hotel maids could be voted in as Soviet deputies! Traditional, overdependent women completely reliant on their men could no longer be spotted in Moscow; if such “men’s decoration”-like creatures could be seen on Moscow streets at all, one might safely assume that they were foreigners (G. Yi 1925b, 1925c). All the middle-school pupils, their social background notwithstanding, were to undergo obligatory labor practice at a factory, as one of Yi’s photographs (1925a) tellingly demonstrated. The streets of Moscow were bustling with people from all the parts of globe, Korea (and Japan) included: “coloured” faces easily caught the eye of observers. For the nonwhite visitors and sojourners, Moscow was the capital of a global struggle for national, racial, and social liberation. Yi (1925c), once an Oxford student himself (1913–1917), contrasted the Red capital with London, the “world’s capital of national slavery and imperialism.” Yes, it was true that the New Economic Policy (NEP) of the 1920s restored private capitalism under party and state control, generating a richer class of “nepmans” (Soviet bourgeoisie); they, however, were deprived of voting rights and social respect. In stark contrast with contemporary Korea, in Moscow one had to wear workers’ clothes to be respected (G. Yi 1925d)! A neo-Kantian philosopher, prolific journalist and influential moderate nationalist keen to collaborate with the Korean leftists, Yi—unlike Yeo Un-hyeong—was neither communist nor even a socialist (H. Lee 2016). Still, the social leveling in postrevolutionary Moscow, as well as the Soviet government’s deliberate emphasis on the promotion of gender and racial equality, seem to have strongly appealed to him.

The Moscow impressions of 1920s’ Korean visitors did not have to be overtly ideologically tinged. Many, but not necessarily all, colonial-age Korean intellectuals with strong interest in or sympathies towards Russia were leftists or proindependence nationalist activists. Some were drawn to Korea’s gigantic northwestern neighbour by a mixture of romantic infatuation with Russian literature and fascination with the peasant land of seemingly borderless plains and forests, so different from both East Asia and the

ordered, modern landscapes of Western Europe. One example of the Russo-phile attitude of a more literary kind is Ham Dae-hun (1907–1949), a graduate of Tokyo Foreign Language School's Russian Department known for his translations of Nikolai Gogol's *Revizor* (The Inspector General) and Maxim Goriky's *Na dne* (The Lower Depths) (J. Kim 2015, 20–26). In his partly autobiographical novel, *Cheongchunbo* (Records of the Youth) (Y. Kang 2016), he projects his own past onto the main protagonist, Gwak Seong-sik, a true lover of Russian literature and language who even travelled from colonial Korea to Harbin to read Russian newspapers and learn conversational Russian from the local Russian emigres (Ham 1947, 78–79). Gwak's love affair with Russia ends tragically: Soviet occupation authorities in the northern part of Korea fall out with the right-wing nationalists of the Korean Democratic Party, to which Gwak belongs, ultimately forcing Gwak to move South. Ham's own post-1945 biography followed the same trajectory (Y. Kang 2016). Yet another prominent colonial-period romantic admirer of Russia was Bak No-a (literarily, "son of Russia"; 1904–?), a distinguished poet and playwright, born and raised in a family of Korean immigrant parents in Russian Far East and known to have studied in Moscow in 1925–1926 (H. Kang 2012). His essay on Moscow life, published in 1929, gives an impression of what mid-1920s' Moscow looked like to a well-disposed, Russian-speaking, noncommunist Korean observer.

Moscow of the NEP era, as Bak No-a saw and represented it, was a realm of rank-and-file, down-to-earth common folks. They were by no means marching all together to a bright communist future: Bak's attentive eye and native-speaker level Russian abilities helped him to discern a number of divergent shades in Moscow's postrevolutionary palette. All the official prohibitions and rehabilitation measures notwithstanding, street prostitutes were still visible to a trained observer. At the Red Square, Strastnaya (later Pushkin) Square and on the smaller, narrow streets around the main thoroughfare of Tverskaya, they were still plying their trade, apprehensively watching for *militsiya* (police) patrols. Sometimes they were seen attempting to attract customers directly beneath street propaganda posters on the dangers of prostitution and sexually transmitted diseases, which they obviously regarded as laughable nonsense. Coquettish young girls from the

provinces were peddling apples, *bulka* (Russian bread), and *semechki* (sunflower seeds) on the central streets; the *semechki* husk was littering the street pavement. Drunkards were still searching for *Russkaya gor'kaya* (strong vodka) late at night, frightening passersby with outbursts of *mat* (obscenities), being themselves too afraid of the night patrols to commit more serious violence. But against this backdrop of discomfort, survival struggles and bad old habits, a tangible democratization of high culture was taking place. Workers, both men and women, were gathering in the evenings near Moscow's famed Bolshoi Theater, as radio speakers there were broadcasting the operas played inside the theater to the culture-hungry public standing outside. Trade union clubs were popularizing chess among their members, and young workers were forming long queues in front of cinemas and theaters, eager to buy tickets and enjoy the arts which had been reserved for the rich and privileged in prerevolutionary times. Non-Russians—Chinese, Mongols, Turks, and so on—were highly visible: new Moscow looked like an “exhibition space for different races” (N. Bak 1929). The visible egalitarianism of Moscow's public life and the cultural rights won by the erstwhile underdogs were appreciated even by rather apolitical Korean observers. That was a facet of an alternative modernity one could only dream of in the highly regimented and unequal colonial-age Korea.

Indeed, what colonial censorship permitted the Korean communist activists to publish in the legal press about their Moscow experiences did not significantly differ from the gist of Bak No-a's impressions. Ideological issues were not easy to deal with in the censored press (J. Yi 2001, 401–502), but the images of new, more egalitarian society full of knowledge-hungry “workers and peasants” could be more or less safely put into print. For example, a former student of the Moscow-based Communist University of the Toilers of the East (KUTV), protected by a pseudonym, gave an account of his encounter with a young shepherd in the vicinities of Moscow, who told the Korean visitor that he attended a trade union-run library and regularly devoured books there. An agricultural worker in summer, the lad was a student for the rest of the year. Yet another encounter was with a female student of medicine, who contrasted women's dependency on men under the Tsarist regime with the multitude of opportunities offered by gender-equal,

postrevolutionary society (Yogeuiri 1930). A medical doctor, Kim Se-yong (1907–1966), known to have studied at the KUTV of the East in the mid-1920s, remembered his time there as a veritable feast of racial and gender equality. His recollections of his Moscow days, published in 1932, feature a tale of an excursion to Leningrad in a company of a Turkish man and a Japanese woman, warm friendship with the female Soviet students of Japanese and heated discussions about Alexandra Kollontai's (1872–1952) radical gender theories which aimed at liberating the “sexual instincts,” no longer to be obstructed by the “reactionary institutions” of family and marriage. The description of the Japanese woman (most likely a fellow student at the KUTV) singing a Korean nationalist revolutionary song at the request of Russian friends exemplified Kim's impressions of the atmosphere of radical brother- and sisterhood he enjoyed so much while in Moscow (S. Y. Kim 1932).

By the mid-1930s, however, Moscow—as Korean observers saw it—came to be much less associated with social or political radicalism than before. Of course, one reason why the Moscow-related texts in Korean periodicals came to put much less emphasis on radical Soviet experimentation by the mid-1930s was the stricter censorship regime in the period in which the Korean Federation of Proletarian Artists (KAPF), weakened by police repression, had to end its legal existence in 1935. Police tolerance of radical discourses, quite limited even in the more liberal 1920s, was quickly waning away (Kwon 2014, 400–410). Yet another reason was, however, the ebbing of the radical currents which the Korean visitors could themselves witness in Moscow. A Korean student in Moscow observed in 1934, for example, that since 1933 Moscow theaters had started to noticeably prefer staging pieces by prerevolutionary authors. Enthusiasm for revolutionary experimentation was supplanted by a stronger emphasis on the development of preexisting traditions (N. G. Baek 1934). Vsevolod Meyerhold (1874–1940), the very epitome of revolutionary radicalism in the theatrical arts, on whom and whose method Ham Dae-hun (1932) wrote an admitting treatise, was no longer in favour. A Korean cinema student on a visit to Moscow's famed Vsesoyuznyi Gosudarstvenyi Institut Kinematografii (VGIIK; “All-Union State Institute of Cinematography”) discovered that the revolu-

tionary films of the 1920s—like Pudovkin’s *Mother* (1926) based on an adaptation of Gorky’s eponymous novels—were treated as classics but were not easy to watch. Old film was routinely in too bad a condition to screen and was not screened very often (E. Bak 1935); mid-1930s Soviet cinema was becoming more professional, but also more frequently aimed at mass entertainment rather than aesthetic experiments.

Much more than cultural experimentation, it was success in industrialization and weapon development that came to symbolize developments in Moscow—and in the USSR in general—in the Korean press in mid-1930s and later (Hwang 2009, 211–212). Expectedly, leftist authors produced paeans to the Soviet industrialization since its beginnings,¹⁵ but the interest in Soviet industrial development was indeed much wider. In 1934 a telling picture in *Dong-A Ilbo* showed a procession of Soviet-made tanks against the background of Moscow’s projected majestic Palace of the Soviets (Dvoretsov) (Anonymous 1934). In 1935, an exhaustive analysis of the international situation in *Samcheolli* named the high-speed expansion of the Soviet industrial economy, as well as the development of Soviet economic ties with the USA and Soviet rivalries vis-à-vis Japan and Germany, as the defining aspects of global politics (G. Kim 1935). A revolutionary, experimental state was reinventing itself as a “normal” global power of a more conventional kind—and the image of its capital in the eyes of Korean observers was changing accordingly.

In 1937, Japan launched a full-scale invasion of China. The Soviet Union had militarily supported the Nationalist government of China (Garver 1992) and was accordingly seen as a major potential enemy in Japanese ruling circles. The Soviet-Japanese clashes near Lake Khasan (1938) and Khalkhin Gol (1939) ensued; all these events were widely reported in the heavily censored colonial Korean press. One could expect neither a friendly nor a neutral tone any longer, as the USSR was now seen as a key inimical power on Japan’s border. Korean journals had to publish what the Japanese censors wanted to read. An influential *Cheondogyo* (Religion of the Heavenly

15. See, for example, an in-depth treatment of the Second Five-Year Plan in Mun (1932).

Way)¹⁶ figure, Yi Seong-hwan (1900–?), argued in 1938, for example, that the inhabitants of Korea’s northeastern areas bordering on the USSR demonstrated model loyalty to the Japanese Empire in the time of the Lake Khasan battles, despite their earlier captivation with “red” ideas. Koreans and Japanese, due to the strength of their “racial unity,” were to fight together under any circumstances against a racially and culturally heterogeneous Russo-Soviet enemy. The erstwhile fascination with Moscow’s progressive modernity was now replaced with angry denunciations of “Soviet imperialism” from which Japan was supposed to “defend” East Asia. A number of especially zealous denouncers were former communists, for whom criticizing “the Comintern’s deception of the world proletariat and weaker nations aimed at defending the USSR by any means” (J. Cha 1938) and the Comintern’s “single-minded determination to harm Japan without any regard for Korea’s national interests” (In 1938) was part of the recantation ritual. However, these communists, who maintained their convictions in the atmosphere of wartime repression, continued to look at the Soviet Union as the very embodiment of human progress, both on social and economic levels. The last known underground communist organization in wartime Korea, Gyeongseong Communist Group (Gyeongseong Komgeurup 京城콤그룹; 1939–1945), included some KUTV graduates. One of them, Hong In-ui (who studied in Moscow 1932–1934), when arrested in 1943, told his Japanese interrogators that Moscow as he saw it—with a working time limited to seven hours a day (with one holiday after every five working days), month-long vacations, six months-long maternity leave, and so on—was superior to any capitalist society. At the same time, encouraged by Soviet industrialization successes and the Red Army’s battleground prowess, the Gyeongseong Communist Group members wished to organize a popular rising in Korea in order to facilitate its liberation by Soviet forces at the end of the Soviet–Japanese war they eagerly anticipated (cited in A. Lee 2002). Both the visible progress of Moscow life and Soviet industrial triumphs were giving hope to colonial Korea’s radicals.

16. On the development of this new religion of modern Korea, see Young (2004).

The Capital of Human Progress?

After the northern part of Korea was indeed liberated by the Red Army in August 1945, the prominent intellectuals from the Soviet occupation zone started their own Moscow pilgrimages, carefully organized by their Soviet hosts. One of the best-known records of such a pilgrimage (undertaken in 1946), writer Yi Tae-jun's (1904–1970) *Ssoryeon gihaeng* (Soviet Diary) (1947),¹⁷ contains a very detailed description of the author's Moscow sojourn. When in the Kremlin, Yi observed, among other objects in Kremlin museum collection, two paintings in a traditional Korean style and other souvenirs brought for the coronation ceremony of the last prerevolutionary Tsar by Korean envoys exactly 50 years earlier, in 1896. Yi, one of the earliest Korean observers with a literary name in post-1945 Moscow, turned critical towards the cultural strategies of the Korean pioneers of diplomacy vis-à-vis Russia, who made one of the first official visits to Moscow in the history of Russo-Korean contacts. According to Yi ([1947] 2001, 50), the souvenirs were chosen rather arbitrarily and fell short of accurately representing Korea's traditional art to the foreigners. As for Moscow, the descriptions in Yi's diary brilliantly summarize the impressions that Korean observers had of Moscow throughout the 1920s and 1930s. The Soviet developmental achievements—symbolized by total literacy, a well-developed school system and Moscow State University named after Lomonosov, with students representing more than a hundred different ethnicities—were more than impressive. Yet the most inspiring factor was the tangible progressiveness of Soviet life. What impressed Yi ([1947] 2001, 46–80) most was seeing women employed regulating traffic, driving buses and trolley-buses, and manning the university's physical laboratory, together with citizens receiving medical treatment free of charge. It did not matter to Yi ([1947] 2001, 168) that a capitalist society could offer shop show windows much more luxurious than those he was observing in a still ascetic postwar Moscow. What mattered was that Moscow was the vanguard of a giant transformation of the whole of humanity, parallel to the discovery of the

17. This book was prohibited in South Korea from 1948 to 1988 (see Bae 2010).

individual in the time of Renaissance. Here in Moscow a new model of human society, which substituted cooperation for competition and liberated the citizens from the yoke of exploitation and alienation, was being pioneered (T. Yi [1947] 2001, 170–171). The image of Moscow as the capital of human progress, so tangibly visible in the 1920s and early 1930s, had returned, as the Soviet Union was taken as the model for North Korea's own radical social transformation.

Of course, one caveat is definitely needed. The positive images of Moscow, typified by the travelogues of Yi Tae-jun, or yet another prominent intellectual who chose the North, well-known historian Baek Nam-un (1894–1979),¹⁸ were not unopposed. Hardly anything else was as politicized as the images of Soviet Union or Moscow in the early Cold War world. Divided Korea, already at the forefront of the global Cold War by 1948, could hardly be an exception. The refutations of Yi Tae-jun's statements on the USSR appeared as early as 1947, some of them in the pages of Catholic newspapers such as *Kyunghyang Shinmun* and *Katollik cheongnyeon*—especially interested in the furtherance of anticommunist propaganda—and written by Koreans with first-hand Soviet experience (see J. Kim 2016, 46–47). A very detailed refutation by a certain Bak Min-won, a former schoolteacher from North Korea who went South after prolonged training in Moscow, appeared serialized in *Dong-A Ilbo* in October–November 1948. Bak and several dozens of his colleagues were dispatched to Moscow for five-month long training in 1947. There, interestingly, one of the founders of postwar Soviet Korean studies, Mikhail Park (1918–2009) was among the Soviet–Korean intellectuals who were to lecture them (in Korean) on the Soviet Constitution, Soviet and world history, and other subjects. Despite listening to these ideologically “correct” lectures, Bak Min-won (1948) was appalled by the obvious poverty of most Soviet citizens, foodstuff shortages, malodorous public toilets at the overcrowded railway stations of Moscow and the exploitation of Japanese prisoners of war—some of whom, he had heard, were actually ethnic Koreans.

Yi Tae-jun and Bak Min-won most likely witnessed broadly the same

18. He visited Moscow in 1949 (see Baek Nam-un [1950] 2005).

reality while in Moscow: indeed, Bak even claims to have met the Soviet Korean who served as Yi's guide a year earlier, in 1946. What differed was their interpretation, as certain features of the postwar Soviet realities were either emphasized or deemphasized from mutually opposing ideological vantage points in the travelogues of Yi and Bak. Soviet Russians' visibly Spartan living conditions could be explained away as an unintended consequence of the concentration on heavy industrial growth needed to win the victory over fascism (T. Yi [1947] 2001, 33), or, to the contrary, seen as a major systemic issue (as it is in Bak's travelogue). Both patterns of perception were heavily ideologized. The limitations of Yi Tae-jun's chosen ideological angle are easily visible from today's standpoint. In fact, they would become amply visible to Yi himself in the later days of his life. For example, Yi quotes approvingly—and in great detail—Andrei Zhdanov's (1896–1948) notorious invectives against the “misanthropic poetry of an old aristocratic poet, Akhmatova,” as well as “anti-Soviet novels by another old writer, Zoshchenko” (Yi Tae-jun [1947] 2001, 98–99),¹⁹ obviously incognizant that he himself was going to encounter a similar ideological assault already by 1953 and later be purged from Pyongyang's literary world as a “bourgeois liberal” (Shin and Oh 2000, 167).

However, the nascent genre of anticommunist criticisms of Soviet life and institutions owed equally much, if not more, to ideological stereotypes. For example, a certain Kim Il-su (1948) condemned Soviet Union, first and foremost, for “licentious sexual life,” the supposed availability of abortion and the ease of divorce proceedings in his book on Soviet daily life published in 1948 (cited in H. S. Lee 2013). Issues of value judgment put aside, his criticism was outdated by almost two decades, as the gender radicalism of the Soviet 1920s—which, as we could see above, was indeed admired by more progressive Korean contemporaries in its time—was long gone in Stalin's Moscow by the late 1940s.²⁰ The diatribes against supposed “sexual debauchery, depravity, drinking, licentious behavior and suicides in the Soviet primary schools” (cited in H. S. Lee 2013, 92) were apparently strate-

19. On Zhdanov's attacks against these writers, see Boterbloem (2004, 279–281).

20. On the Stalinist restoration of “family values,” see Hoffman (2003, 88–118).

gically calculated to frighten and scandalize the more conservative, still Confucian South Koreans. They did not, however, seem to have proven particularly effective as far as Korea's modern intelligentsia was concerned, as dozens of colonial-age literary talents who ultimately chose the North have testified (M. Yi 2016, 23–25). Their choosing of Pyongyang's alternative modernity was most likely related, among many other things, to their positive attitude vis-à-vis its Moscow prototype.

Conclusion: The World-Historical Value of the Early Soviet Experiences?

All in all, the metamorphoses of the Moscow images in precolonial and colonial Korea closely followed developments in the old city of Muscovy's Tsars and later Soviet capital. Prerevolutionary Moscow, as seen by Yun Chi-ho, a knowledgeable and acute observer with experiences from China, Japan, USA and Western Europe, was a strange combination of expensive Tsarist pageantry, an underdeveloped urban infrastructure, and catastrophic levels of misadministration, which resulted in the Khodynka tragedy. Moscow in the postrevolutionary era and throughout the 1920s was seen as a site of unprecedented social experimentation—the place where one could witness the birth of the new, relatively more equalitarian world. One did not have to be a socialist revolutionary to admire what one could see in 1920s' Moscow. Yi Gwan-yong, a neo-Kantian philosopher and moderate nationalist, lauded the country where the workers were respected and bourgeoisie was deprived of voting rights. Even rather apolitical observations of quotidian life in 1920s' Moscow, of the type one can find in Bak Ro-a's essays on his travel to the Soviet capital, included mentions of the large-scale democratization of what had been elite high culture in the prerevolutionary days.

By the mid-1930s, however, the new patterns of the social stratification and cultural conservatism typical of the Stalinist age were also duly noticed. Gide's criticisms of the Stalinist Soviet Union's bourgeois mores and attitudes in socialist garb—known to Korean intellectuals through a partial Japanese translation already in 1936 (J. Kim 2016, 46–47)—were countered

by Yu Jin-o (1906–1987), then still a Marxist and afterwards one of the drafters of South Korea's first Constitution. In a newspaper review of Gide's book, Yu rebuked him for his presumed inability to discern the Soviet Union's brighter socialist future through the Communist Party's program, while looking at the still deficient present state of affairs (cited in H. S. Lee 2013, 74–75). However, the realities pointed out by Gide were visible to his Korean contemporaries as well. Korean observers of Moscow life in the mid-1930s used to notice the differentiation in attire between diverse social groups, or classical works' preponderance on the theatrical scenes. In the mid-1930s, it was high-speed modern development—symbolized by the Moscow metro's grandeur or newly asphalted streets—that attracted most attention in Korea. While the official press treated Moscow as an enemy capital beginning in 1937–1938, the underground communists still considered the progressive labour and welfare practices, which they could earlier witness there, the pinnacle of world-historical development.

A similar attitude was further developed by certain pioneering North Korean visitors, such as Yi Tae-jun, who wanted North Korea to change in Moscow's image. It is important to remember, however, that the admiration was far from being universal. As the Cold War was setting in on the Korean Peninsula, Moscow was rapidly becoming the signifier of the “evil” for right-wing anticommunists. While their criticisms of Stalinist Moscow's “regime of terror” (cited in H. S. Lee 2013, 92) were not necessarily ungrounded,²¹ some of them were appealing to conservative stereotypes, turning the presumed loose sexual mores of the Soviet capital into a handy anti-pode of the Confucian virtue. Inimical descriptions of Moscow were equally, if not more ideologized, than the pro-Soviet ones.

With the benefit of hindsight it is easy, of course, to notice a glaring lack of knowledge mixed with naiveté in many Koreans' observations of Moscow. We know, for example, that legal gender equality did not imply immediate and complete cessation of gender discrimination practices even

21. The arrests of the opponents of Soviet occupation policy on the North Korean territory by the Soviet military authorities in 1945–1948 provided one ground for such descriptions (J. Kim 2016, 48–49).

in the first and most idealist years of the revolution. The New Economic Policy—basically private capitalism under the Party-state control—revitalized economic life but added to the woes of the more vulnerable groups, women included. Even Party congress resolutions of the early 1920s mentioned, for example, the widespread practices of gender discrimination in many factories, including those located in Moscow. Female workers were often the first to be fired and had enormous difficulties finding work, as more women (compared to men) lacked trade union membership, then an important prerequisite for employment. Unemployed women, either unmarried or abandoned by their husbands, often had to turn to prostitution to feed themselves (and their children). Contrary to many Korean observers' hopeful descriptions of full gender liberation in "red Moscow"—and more in line with Bak No-a's shrewd observations of 1920s' Moscow street life—prostitution did not disappear in the Soviet capital. A 1924 survey of 601 Moscow prostitutes found out that half of them were forced onto the streets by hunger; a 1925 research reported that 84 percent of surveyed prostitutes tried to leave the streets but could not find jobs (cited in Goldman 1993, 110–119). The Party indeed initiated the establishment of rehabilitation facilities for the prostitutes ("work-treatment preventative clinics") which Kim Seo-sam mentioned, but by the early 1930s many such facilities came to simply utilize these forcibly institutionalized women as a cheap workforce without much interest in "rehabilitating" them; meanwhile, underground prostitution continued to exist in most big cities, Moscow included (Lebina 2015, 321–401).

While Yi Gwan-yong admired the prevalence of toilers—including females—among the Soviet deputies in Moscow in 1925, the real power was by then no longer in the hands of the Soviets. Soviets were largely relegated to fulfilling the tasks set by Party directives. Since nonindustrial workers—artisans, small-time traders, white-collar workers, housewives, and so forth—were often reluctant to vote for Party candidates, the voting rights for different population groups were far from equal. For example, in Moscow Soviet elections on all levels in 1926–1927, industrial workers could elect one deputy per 100 persons, while nonindustrial workers were allowed only one deputy for 600 persons. The voters—while being offered no organized

political alternative to the communists since the early 1920s—were still relatively free in exercising their electoral rights, but Party control over the elections was being gradually tightened (Salamatova 2015). In other words, the rosy pictures one finds in the Korean accounts of 1920–1930s’ Moscow did not fully reflect the facts on the ground; Korean observers obviously tended to project their own longings for an alternative, noncapitalist modernity onto their Moscow narratives.

Still, the Korean accounts of 1920–1930s’ Moscow were more than simply reflections of Korean travelers’ own yearnings for socialist utopias. For one thing, Koreans astutely noticed the deep social changes which took place in mid-1930s, when the new, bureaucratic hierarchy of status and privilege was more or less cemented. They were, however, much less critical of the retreat from the revolutionary egalitarianism than the likes of Gide. After all, from colonial Korea’s standpoint, even the amount of social reforms that the Soviet Union still managed to accomplish was rather significant. And, like Feuchtwanger who pinned his hopes for antifascist resistance on Moscow, anticolonial Koreans had a reason to hope that Soviet industrial development and concurrent military buildup would be helpful for their liberation. In addition, even if their accounts were somewhat misinformed, simplistic, or exaggerated, they were still a truthful representation of certain tendencies that the newborn Soviet society possessed. Despite all its limitations, it indeed attempted a drastic democratization of social and cultural life. Gender norms undeniably switched in the direction of greater equality, although the real picture was much less perfect than that which the Korean visitors observed and reported. A wider popular access to high culture was indeed ensured. Soviet internationalism and efforts to combat racist and chauvinistic attitudes were authentic, although again perhaps significantly less successful in concrete social practice than Korean observers used to suggest. It was these tendencies that made Moscow the mecca of the new, coming world for so many Koreans, both socialists and nonsocialists, in the 1920–1930s. Such an image of Moscow continued to exercise its influence on the Korean intelligentsia in general after the 1945 Liberation as well—something that the 1946 account of a pilgrimage to Moscow by Yi Tae-jun, who was not involved with the socialist movement

before 1945,²² can testify to. For a number of Korean intellectuals, including some colonial-era moderates, these tendencies were demonstrating the desirable direction of social transformation for the whole world, Korea included.

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22. Yi gradually radicalized in 1945–1946, before his move to North Korea in July–August 1946 (Park 1999, 261–269).

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