



To be a Citizen in the World of Language: *Cosmopolitanism in South Korea*

You Kyung SON

Abstract

This paper reimagines cosmopolitanism in postwar South Korea by understanding Ri Yeong-hui (1929–2010) and Choe In-hun (1936–2018) as cosmopolitan readers. A cosmopolitan reader refers to an individual who tenaciously intermingles personal history and human history, and national issues and transnational issues in her imagination while reading. Ri, widely known as a dissident intellectual, repeatedly undermined the power of anticommunism and the logic of the Cold War through his lifelong project of reading. In his last published interview, Daehwa (Conversations, 2005), Ri exemplifies a cosmopolitanism of dissent by invoking the transnational nature of national issues in the Third World. The renowned novelist Choe In-hun shares critical characteristics with Ri as a cosmopolitan reader. The narrator of his autobiographical novel Hwadu (The Keyword, 1994) emerges as a novelist whose literary imagination is not bound by national borders. The two figures' performative acts of cosmopolitan reading suggest that cosmopolitanism is an ongoing process in which the reader seeks a revolutionary change in the understanding of self, nation, and literature. By shifting the focus from text to reading, and from ideology to praxis, this paper reconfigurates the very notion of cosmopolitanism by problematizing certain premises that shape its understanding in western academia.

Keywords: cosmopolitanism, cosmopolitan reader, the Cold War, Ri Yeong-hui, Choe In-hun

This work was supported by the Overseas Training Expenses for Humanities & Social Sciences through Seoul National University (SNU).

You Kyung SON is associate professor in the Department of Korean Language and Literature, Seoul National University. E-mail: kyung75@snu.ac.kr.

Introduction

I worked as a journalist who had daily contact with the lives of human beings on a global scale and felt the heartbeat of humanity and the heat of life. My job as a foreign affairs journalist required deep sympathy for and profound comprehension of all the different types of human survival, as well as a sense of unity with all human beings. Such a vocation made me devote myself to extensive reading.

— Ri Yeong-hui

Books are humans, and humans are books. I wonder if I willed myself into thinking so. As soon as a person of our world “enters” the world of a book, he sheds whatever nationality he had in our world and becomes a citizen of the “World of Language.” It doesn’t matter whether they are Russian or Korean.

— Choe In-hun

In recent years, many literary critics have shown a renewed interest in cosmopolitanism in response to an immense increase in transnational discourses. The term *cosmopolitanism* has been used largely to refer to a concept alternative to globalization, a process in which the United States continues to wield a position of hegemony. While globalization, according to Robert Spencer, is a matter of homogenizing our world, cosmopolitanism is a reaction against this process (Spencer 2011, 4). Pheng Cheah also has noted “the globe is not a world” and that “this is a necessary premise if the cosmopolitan vocation of world literature can be meaningful today” (Cheah 2016, 42). In this sense, one might say there is a subtle difference between the *world* and the *globe* since in most parts of cosmopolitanism studies the word *world* implies something better than or alternative to the *globe*, a word which inevitably reminds one of the United States and its power. This, however, is not always the case. When Bruce Robbins, for instance, introduced the phrase “feeling global,” which was also the title of his monograph (1999), what he had in mind was definitely somewhat of a utopian *world*.

Cosmopolitanism thus cannot be understood without taking into

consideration “the ethical and political quandaries inherent in a globalizing world” (THR 2009, 6). Although cosmopolitanism has undergone significant development in both theory and practice, a detailed study has yet to be devoted to the subject of non-western cosmopolitanism. Cosmopolitanism in Korea, in particular, has been seldom noted in academia for several reasons. First of all, rather than being studied as a political, ethical and cultural term, cosmopolitanism has been at most regarded as a Westernized lifestyle pertaining to a privileged status and an abstract aspiration toward belonging to a harmonious cosmos. Simply put, it has not been considered as a kind of a philosophy or an ideology in Korea.

Second, the political, philosophical, and cultural potentials of cosmopolitanism in relation to Korea have hardly been explored because when it comes to the study of ideologies in the Korean context, the dichotomous view of nationalism versus socialism has assumed so much priority that other systems of thought have been rendered invisible. This *non-cosmopolitan* atmosphere has something to do with the ideological apparatuses of the Cold War, which have prevailed in the social, political and cultural fabric of the Korean nation for a long time. As we shall see, the Cold War system played a vital role in both serving and subverting the logic of what Alexa Weik von Mossner calls “uncosmopolitan” (Mossner 2014, 24) national policy. She points out that countries of the so-called “free world” under Cold War ideology discouraged their people from going beyond national boundaries, either physically or mentally, for fear they might engage with communist powers. At the same time, Mossner argues the Cold War system also furthered the development of cosmopolitan minds, as it produced strong emotional reactions against anti-communism and fostered high aspirations toward cultural practices that resisted the dichotomization of communism and capitalism.

Thirdly, and most importantly, cosmopolitanism was largely considered to have little pertinence to the histories and cultures of non-western societies in which the project of building a modern nation-state was prioritized over all other imperatives. In a sense, these societies did not possess self-confined national territories in the first place. In the Third World, the traumatic memory of losing one’s homeland took deep root in every aspect

of the people's lives, such that they have had very little chance to imagine worlds beyond their own in spite of the obvious encounters with foreign powers. This was especially true for Korea in the mid-twentieth century. Having long suffered a turbulent series of events such as colonization by Japan, the Korean War, and national division, for the Korean people there was no task more urgent than building a modern nation-state. However, shortly after the downfall of the corrupt Syngman Rhee regime, Koreans experienced yet another historical turning point brought about by the military dictatorship of Park Chung-hee, who styled his rule a coupling of staunch anti-communism and state-led economic growth. Under Park's military dictatorship, the South Korean people witnessed the rise of statist nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s.

Given these historical observations, a new theoretical horizon must be imagined for cosmopolitanism in Korea to be thoroughly accounted for. It is cosmopolitanism in postwar Korea that makes it possible to revisit the potentials of Korean intellectuals and artists whose spirits were not confined to the Cold War dichotomy of nationalism versus socialism. The primary goal of this essay is to draw out the striking characteristics of cosmopolitanism in postwar South Korea by paying close attention to the work of two figures: Ri Yeong-hui (1929–2010), a representative dissident intellectual, and Choe In-hun (1936–2018), a renowned experimental novelist.

Ri is widely known as a renowned dissident and has been hailed as the greatest teacher by such major nationalist critics as Baek Nak-cheong in the pages of *Changjak-gwa bipyeong* (Creation and Criticism), whereas Choe is a novelist whose major literary works were published and praised by liberal critics in *Munhak-gwa jiseong* (Literature and the Intellect). Despite their seemingly antithetical dispositions, it is clear these two writers share a fundamental resemblance, as I will illustrate later in this paper. This resemblance includes their hatred of imperialism, militarism, and capitalism led by the United States—all three of which are linked to their deep concern for human history. The two writers also share a belief in the freedom of thought and imagination. Previous studies of Korean literature of the 1970s have seldom noted these similarities, however, mainly because these studies

were focused on a perennial understanding of a rivalry between *Changjak-gwa bipyeong* and *Munhak-gwa jiseong*.¹

In my analysis of these two figures, I argue that—contrary to how differently each has been perceived in the South Korean intellectual scene thus far—Choe’s literary works resonate with, or even accentuate, what Ri has envisioned in his academic world. This paper will situate Choe’s unique literary achievement as well as Ri’s outstanding academic legacy within a rich intellectual context through the lens of recent theories of cosmopolitanism.

Generally speaking, the western notion of cosmopolitanism has come to the fore as a counterpart to nationalism. According to Bruce Robbins, “only the enemies of cosmopolitanism have been eager to situate it.” The opposition between nationalism and cosmopolitanism is no longer self-evident since, as Robbins points out, “cosmos,” just like nations, “come in different sizes and styles” (Robbins 1998, 2). Nevertheless, it is clear that there has been, for a long time, a clear-cut contrast between nationalism and cosmopolitanism in the West. Even if cosmopolitanism and nationalism are not always understood as mutually exclusive, it is undeniable that cosmopolitanism has been at least described in its counter-relationship to nationalism.

What is intriguing here is that many scholars of cosmopolitanism familiar with the conventional opposition of nationalism and cosmopolitanism have complicated this opposition by using Benedict Anderson’s classic text *Imagined Communities* (1983) as a theoretical cornerstone. In tracing modern nationalism’s origins to print capitalism and the national feelings triggered by it, Anderson himself may have been, in the words of Bruce Robbins, an “eloquent defender nationalist” who insisted that there is no legitimate feeling outside the nation (Robbins 1998, 4). Some

1. *Changjak-gwa bipyeong* and *Munhak-gwa jiseong* were the twin pillars of South Korean literary quarterlies in the 1970s. Whereas the Changbi camp insisted on the *active and militant resistance* of Korean intellectuals to the military dictatorship in the 1970s, the Munji group emphasized *an autonomous realm of absolute aesthetics of literary arts*. The disparate intellectual orientations of the two quarterlies led the editorial members of Changbi to advocate the literary discourse of realism, and those of Munji to become associated with theories of modernism. See Youngju Ryu (2016, 104–108).

argue, however, that the logic of print capitalism—namely, that the print market and newspapers cultivate a certain affinity or fellowship even among those who are never physically proximate by calling upon the imagination of a community—need not be constricted by national boundaries. That is, feelings, as Robbins notes, are produced within a nation through print, but national boundaries do not limit the reach of feelings produced by print capitalism (Robbins 1998, 2).

In this vein, Robbins distinguishes between two cosmopolitanisms. On the one hand, there is the somewhat old-fashioned abstract ideal of cosmopolitanism. Immanuel Kant, well known for being a luminary of modern cosmopolitanism (“perpetual peace”), and Martha Nussbaum, who advanced the notion of ideal humanity as a moral basis for all human beings, are the representative figures of this category. Nussbaum’s theory, however, has been critiqued for its inherent elitism and Eurocentrism, especially in light of such characterizations as “a weak universalism” (Delanty 2017, 43), “liberalism” (Iqtidar 2017, 201), and an “image of the self as at the center of a series of concentric circles” (Werbner 2017, 156). On the other hand, there are cosmopolitanisms newly developed by scholars who attempt “to bring cosmopolitanism down to earth” (Robbins 2012, 15). This latter approach has produced theories such as “postcolonial cosmopolitanism,” “Asian cosmopolitanism,” or “cosmopolitan from below” (Robbins 1998, 1–2). Gesturing to these theoretical developments, Tamara Caraus explicitly describes the recent turn as one towards “non-totalizing, non-European, non-liberal, non-normative and historically situated forms of cosmopolitanism” (Caraus 2015, 4).

As these examples testify, one of the most notable shifts in contemporary theories of cosmopolitanism has been a growing call among numerous scholars to situate, actualize, and relativize the concept in specific historical contexts. Bruce Robbins has dubbed these tendencies as cosmopolitanism “full of historical particularities” or “actually existing” cosmopolitanism.

In re-characterizing Ri and Choe as Korean cosmopolitans, I am not proposing that we come up with yet another model of cosmopolitanism. Instead of understanding cosmopolitanism in South Korea merely as a

variation or *derivative* of cosmopolitanism proper, I aim to problematize certain premises of cosmopolitanism studies in the West by relativizing the very notion of cosmopolitanism and interrogating the ways in which the discourse around cosmopolitanism has been dominated by Western academia. In this paper, I do this by presenting Ri and Choe as cosmopolitan readers. The two figures' performative act of cosmopolitan reading suggests that cosmopolitanism is not only an ideological goal but also an ongoing process in which the reader persistently correlates individuality and humanity, personal history and human history, and the fate of Korea and those of others with each other. As I demonstrate in this paper, situating the intellectuals as cosmopolitan readers enables us to see that the relationship between the *I* and the *nation-state* might not be the primary association to which all others are made subordinate. In other words, what Bruce Robbins calls "detachment from the national interest" (Robbins 2012, 28) may not be the essential element of Korean cosmopolitanism. Rather, the unprecedented change in philosophical understandings of self, nation, and literature plays an integral part of Korean cosmopolitans' thinking and imagination. This shift from text to reading and from ideology to praxis will ultimately bring us to further speculate on two ineluctable questions of language and power: 1) In what language do cosmopolitans speak? 2) Who sets cosmopolitan values?

Ri Yeong-hui's Dissident Cosmopolitanism

With most of his writings banned by the state and his physical body incarcerated time and again for alleged violations of the notorious Anticommunist Act, Ri Yeong-hui was a central figure in the dissident movement against the authoritarian rule of the Park Chung-hee (Bak Jeong-hui) regime in South Korea in the 1970s. Born in 1929 in what is today a province of North Korea, Ri belonged to the generation of Koreans who grew up under the Japanese colonial rule and experienced the trauma of the Korean War and subsequent national division firsthand. However, rather than subscribe blindly to the nationalist ideology of anticommunist

developmentalism—in whose name Park Chung-hee maintained his brutal military dictatorship—Ri insisted on situating the Korean Peninsula within the Cold War system. As Theodore Hughes has pointed out, the Cold War system turned the 38th parallel separating North and South Korea into the frontline of the “Free World” and not merely the boundary between the two Koreas (Hughes 2012, 17; Ryu 2016, 18). In this section, I will examine Ri’s cosmopolitanism by analyzing *Daehwa* (Conversations) (2005), a book of interviews that became Ri’s last published work, as an iconic text that presents the life of a dissident intellectual who resisted the violent attempts of a Cold War state to confine him within the logic of national boundaries. What results from this resistance is a view of a conscientious intellectual whose life lays open to view the inevitable cosmopolitan nature of national issues in the Third World.

One of the most distinguished roles Ri played as a dissident intellectual is that of demonstrating the degree to which the Cold War had for decades prescribed the modes of apprehending and imagining the world in Korea. Most Koreans, according to Ri, had been “anesthetized” by the state propaganda of anticommunism and the logic of the Cold War (Ri and Im 2005, 352). Ri’s research and writings at that time were primarily motivated by his critical understanding of the Korean people, who were oblivious to the imperialist nature of the United States and the Cold War ideology (Ri and Im 2005, 362). In his view, under these circumstances, it was easy, even natural, for Koreans to produce and nurture the dichotomous view of the world of friend and enemy. Anyone who envisioned *another* world inspired by cosmopolitan thinking and imagination would likely have been labeled a dissident figure by the anticommunist government.

Ri began his career as a journalist after having served in the army for seven years. His professional ethics as a conscientious journalist anchored his unwavering effort to unveil the hidden truth about the Vietnam War. As he started seeing the deceptive foreign policies of the United States with a penetrating eye, Ri tenaciously struggled to uncover the secrets regarding the Vietnam War. Ri, a rare figure who was able to fathom the complex international situation wherein the US was augmenting its imperialist agenda under the banner of the *Free World*, was a genuinely sympathetic

intellectual. He felt a pain similar to that of the Vietnamese people who were living through a national trauma at the time. In this respect, Ri might be considered a person *feeling global*, as expressed by Bruce Robbins in the title of his book. During the Vietnam War and for decades after, Ri's journalist spirit was dedicated to exposing the sordid aspects of the aggressive warfare led by the anticommunist militant leaders in the United States. Ri's investigative writings thus became a thorn in the side of the anticommunist politicians under the Park regime. Not surprisingly, many dissident students and intellectuals in South Korea were influenced immensely by Ri's writings. His *Jeonhwan sidae-ui noll* (The Logic of the Transitional Period, 1981), a book bringing together his articles about the Vietnam War, became an inspiring must-read for numerous intellectuals in South Korea during the Cold War period.

After being banned from his profession by the Park regime, Ri began his second career as a professor of Chinese studies. As a founding father of the China Research Institute at Hanyang University (Hanyangdae jungguk munje yeonguso), the first academic institute devoted to the study of China established in South Korea since liberation, he became increasingly preoccupied with the idea of an alternative world where neither Western capitalism nor the Russian bureaucratic system would prevail. It follows that his work during this period is constituted by his desperate efforts to seek a way out of both the globalized capitalist system led by the United States and the ill-fated socialist system of the Soviet model. China, it appeared to him, was a viable alternative model for Korea, a nation benumbed by anticommunism and the Cold War ideology, in that the Chinese Revolution provided a blueprint for the synthesis of Western socialism and East Asian traditions. Some scholars have criticized Ri's academic lens for being biased by leftist ideologies, arguing that his works mystify the Chinese Revolution. On closer inspection, however, it is clear that Ri's work is far from celebratory of socialism. Ri conducted Chinese studies in a thoroughly iconoclastic way, claiming that his own academic practices should function as "an antidote of radical right anticommunist education in South Korea" (Ri and Im 2005, 454). In addition, Ri was fascinated by the Chinese Communist Revolution because he believed he could find in it the promise

of a revolution of the human spirit. According to Ri, one of the worst harms of capitalist culture is its maximization of human selfishness and the unlimited desire for material possessions (Ri and Im 2005, 684–687). Ri insisted that through recovering human sensibility, all human beings could be freed from toxic capitalist culture.

As he stresses in *Conversations*, Ri's preoccupation with the Vietnam War and the Chinese Communist Revolution were both rooted in "deep sympathy for all the different types of human survivals" (Ri and Im 2005, 299). By invoking the Vietnamese national resistance and the Chinese Revolution as global alternatives to the hegemonic powers of his times, Ri repeatedly undermined the power of anticommunism and the logic of the Cold War system. Ri summed up his deep faith in cosmopolitanism when he stated, "I did not lose self-confidence as an intellectual because global flow has given me hope" (Ri and Im 2005, 422). His firm belief that universal justice would eventually prevail helped him endure the turbulent decades of the latter half of the 20th century in South Korea (Ri and Im 2005, 424).

It is from such transnational approaches to national politics that Ri's cosmopolitan imagination of a world community emerge. Indeed, as Bruce Robbins has noted, "there is no national landscape that is not simultaneously transnational" (Robbins 2012, 155). Ri, in this respect, was a cosmopolitan nationalist, for he stressed the importance of peace on the Korean Peninsula while concurrently advocating for the development of a new cosmopolitan appreciation of peace. Cosmopolitanism, in his view, should be taken as a rich source of national recognition.

From the vantage point of the 21st century, what makes Ri's vision of a better world a compelling one is that he is an eloquent advocate of *peace*, which has been fundamentally impaired by worldwide imperialism and widespread military culture in South Korea. Whereas there are numerous veterans in South Korea who turned into fervent pro-war anti-communists after serving in the army, Ri after his service became a strong opponent of war, passionately espousing cosmopolitan values such as justice, freedom, and above all, peace. Such a position is rooted in his animosity towards a Korean army riddled with violence and corruption (Ri and Im 2005, 162–163). After Ri served as both a liaison officer and a military interpreter

during the three years of the Korean War, he was forced to remain in the army for four more years after the armistice because the Korean army, which was beginning to expand at the time, needed qualified officers in special areas. While serving as a military interpreter for a total of seven years, he became keenly aware of the political and military hegemony that the US held in Korea and the subordinate position of South Korea as well. Militarism, in his opinion, always takes from people freedom, justice, and the ability to self-govern. “Even if our nation could be reunified by war, I’m against war” (Ri and Im 2005, 170). Echoing the feminist writer Jeong Hui-jin, we might say Ri was the first scholar of peace studies in post-colonial Korea (Jeong 2005, 367).

Ri’s cosmopolitan position was polemical in the sense that the very act of seeking truth to imagine a new, peaceful, and more just world could be seen as leftist subversive behavior at the time. Not surprisingly, many intellectuals have called Ri “a teacher of critical thinking” for he dedicated much of his life to the ethical project of researching the truth about the Vietnam War and the Chinese Communist Revolution under an anticommunist regime that espoused Cold War ideology. Ri’s academic practices epitomize the cosmopolitan potential of dissident intellectuals in 1970s’ South Korea. In his attempt to transcend the given situation by resisting and interrogating the existing system in spite of repeated persecution by an unjust military regime, Ri exemplifies what Tamara Caraus has theorized about a legacy of dissent in cosmopolitanism. The main feature of cosmopolitanism of dissent is that “the dissident practices are situated locally, but evoke universal cosmopolitan values” (Caraus 2015, 4). The core idea shared by all dissident cosmopolitans is that they explicitly reject the given unjust political power or regime by both refusing to be confined within a certain circumstance and expanding “the space of life from an unjust polis toward an ideal cosmos” (Caraus 2015, 17). Therefore, as Caraus argues, being global does not necessarily mean being cosmopolitan. With great emphasis on the significant intersection between cosmopolitanism and dissent, Caraus stresses that the cosmopolitanism of dissent is the legacy of the practice of contesting or rejecting existing unjust regimes/powers. What distinguishes the cosmopolitanism of the dissident

from other forms of cosmopolitanism, such as economic or cultural cosmopolitanisms,² is that it is not interested in offering an idealized vision of the entire world by postulating a global consensus. The essence of the cosmopolitanism of dissent, Caraus maintains, does not lie in its capacity to expand *our* world but rather in the potential to imagine *another* (usually better) world.³

As we shall see later, it is important to remember that Ri's vision contains an urgent call to engage in the cosmopolitan reading through which one strives to go beyond conventional reading, such as a national one, so that one can foster one's own capacity to think up and imagine another, better world. The spectrum of Ri's reading is so broad and his desire for books is so intense that, according to his own memory, he read books from all over the world, in such fields as literature, economics, social science, politics, and foreign policy. What is unique about his reading experience is that he read most of his books in their original language; Ri was able to do this because he, as someone educated during the Japanese colonial era, was fluent in English as well as Japanese. Later, he even taught himself how to read French texts. During his middle school years, Ri was fascinated by the collection of world literature translated into Korean from Japanese. Western classics by such writers as Goethe, Leo Tolstoy, Victor Hugo, and Edgar Allan Poe were included in his reading list. Ri also enjoyed reading Chinese classics like *Sanguozhi Yanyi* and works by modern Asian authors such as Natsume Sōseki and Lu Xun. Lu Xun, in particular, was a figure Ri loved throughout his life (Ri and Im 2005, 67–74). In college, Ri immersed himself in Victorian poetry by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Robert Browning, John Keats, William Butler Yeats, and Alfred Lord Tennyson. His interest in 19th and 20th century English authors included Thomas Carlyle, Joseph Conrad, Charles Dickens and Thomas Hardy (Ri and Im 2005, 90–96). Even the Korean War did not dampen Ri's desire to read voraciously; he

2. Pauline Kleingeld and Eric Brown, "Cosmopolitanism," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2019 Edition), edited by Edward N. Zalta, accessed December 7, 2020, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2019/entries/cosmopolitanism/>.

3. Caraus elaborates in this book three different types of cosmopolitan dissent: anti-authoritarian dissidence, civil disobedience, and global resistance.

read Anne Frank's *The Diary of a Young Girl* and Tolstoy's *War and Peace* during the war (Ri and Im 2005, 141–143). As a journalist, Ri consumed newsmagazines, including the *New Statesman*, *Spectator*, *New Republic*, and many other magazines published by the progressive publishing company Monthly Review (Ri and Im 2005, 190–193). In the 1960s and 1970s, Ri devoted himself to reading books on political economy, particularly those by Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Mao Zedong, Rosa Luxemburg, and Leon Trotsky (Ri and Im 2005, 370–375). During his time at the China Research Institute, Ri concentrated on researching the Chinese revolution by reading Edgar Snow, Nym Wales, Anna L. Strong, and Otto Braun (Ri and Im 2005, 438–440). Ri's time in prison was no exception to this lifelong devotion to reading. In prison too Ri's reading list spanned many genres, from autobiographies to biographies to novels, and defied national boundaries, covering criticisms written in French and Chinese philosophical texts such as *The Analects of Confucius and Mencius* (Ri and Im 2005, 510–515).

As he describes it, he was just like “a thirsty person who seeks spring water” (Ri and Im 2005, 97). Ri demonstrates that there are many ways for intellectuals from non-western societies to realize their cosmopolitan potential without the privileged experience of a free-floating tourist. It is from his lifelong project of cosmopolitan reading that his provocative opinions stem. Ri, as a representative cosmopolitan dissident, suggests that although a human being may be confined to certain structures—be they geographical, economical or cultural—one can and should refuse to be confined. One should not be confined within given circumstances but rather question, contest, and challenge the existing power/regime.

Choe In-hun's Literary Cosmopolitanism

The unique characteristics of Ri as a tenacious reader with a cosmopolitan mind recalls another remarkable writer, Choe In-hun, whose literary career was profoundly affected by his personal experience in the Korean War. Born in what is today North Korea in 1936, Choe migrated to southern Korea with his family after liberation in 1945. His personal experience as

a refugee was a recurrent theme in his novels. Moreover, as a major writer in South Korea, he had the rare chance of visiting both the United States and the former Soviet Union. Choe's autobiographical novel *Hwadu* (The Keyword, 1994) is a telling example that demonstrates how his luxuriant literary imagination was nurtured not only by the physical experience of crossing the national border, but also through his lifelong performative act of cosmopolitan reading.

The Keyword consists of two volumes. The main story of the first volume concerns what the narrator thought and felt while in the United States from 1973 to 1976. The second volume mainly covers the story of his visit to the former Soviet Union in 1990s. The text tells of the experiences of the narrator in the past, including his childhood in North Korea immediately after the liberation in 1945. Later on, the narrator spent three years in the United States as a visiting artist; and he visited the former Soviet Union in the 1990s as a tourist. The whole narrative is characterized by the way in which the narrator weaves his personal and historical stories together.

In the first volume, the narrator is invited to the University of Iowa as a visiting artist. In a small town in Iowa, he is deeply moved by the freedom and sense of community Americans have. He also admires the natural environment that the Americans are living in. At the same time, he comes to realize that the US government as a world leader puts great emphasis on keeping its imperialist power intact. Learning about the United States as a complex society triggers the narrator to reflect upon the consequences of imperialism and militarism in modern Korea, whose fate was dramatically shaped by political events around the world.

In a notable moment in the text, the narrator imagines his own gravestone as stating, "Sleep in Peace. Wanderer from the Unknown Land" (Choe 2008, 329). This engraving attests to the narrator's description of himself as an exile from his hometown or as an outsider, born to be a wanderer. The narrator's mindset seems to be similar to what Debora Parsons has called the "placeless state."⁴ He realizes that when he is in the

4. Focusing on the subtle differences in meaning between metropolitan, international, and cosmopolitan, Deborah Parsons points out that the cosmopolitan figure is characterized by a

United States, he can live only as a citizen of a conceptual world, not of the existing world. This is a frequent theme in Choe's novels. Many of his main characters, such as Yi Myeong-jun in *Gwangjang* (The Square, 1960), emerge as "truth-seekers" who try to figure out the secret of life to escape the ideological strictures of their given circumstances. *The Keyword's* narrator situates himself as a truth-seeking outsider in ways that parallel many other characters in Choe's previous literary works. His works share the common message that whatever one's sociopolitical milieu, one can and should maintain a critical distance from one's given situation so as to transcend it by oneself. Yi Myeong-jun in *The Square*, for instance, decides to go to the third world (an allusion to taking his own life), in lieu of choosing from the options laid out before him—namely, to go to the *Free World* or to the communist countries. Similarly, the narrator of *The Keyword* who emerges as a character with an exquisite sense of balance, struggles to understand what it is to be a citizen in a world whose complexity is lost under the Cold War system.

As a critical observer who is at odds with the surrounding world, the narrator explores the implications of his personal experience and specific historical events in Korea within the wider context of human history. Most importantly, the narrator, specifically in the second volume, expresses a deep interest in the history of the former Soviet Union, including, unsurprisingly, the events surrounding the Russian Revolution in 1917. In fact, the entire narrative of the second volume of *The Keyword* is framed by the author's reflections on the legacy of the Russian Revolution. The vicissitudes of modern Russian history become the lens through which the narrator navigates the question of how *personal history*, *national history*, and *human history* intermingle. It is against the backdrop of this intellectual odyssey that the narrator's insightful accounts of the ill-fated Russian Revolution unfold in detail.

In this historical account, the narrator's imagination extends far beyond national borders. Russia, for instance, becomes an entity entwined with the narrator's personal destiny, both physical and mental. His recollection

"decentralized, placeless state" rather than by a fixed identity (Parsons 2003, 85–86).

of childhood in North Korea, a recollection entangled with his recurring memory of the dire experience of self-criticism sessions (*Ja bipan hoe*), is associated with his recognition of the transnational nature of individual life in the Third World. The main purpose of the self-criticism sessions he goes through as a middle school student is to reaffirm his socialist ideology—a process enforced in a draconian fashion. As the narrator recalls in the novel, it is the ongoing hegemonic war between foreign powers such as the US and USSR that perpetuates the narrator's misfortune, including the self-criticism sessions at school in North Korea, eviction from his hometown after liberation, and his subsequent life as an exile in South Korea.

The narrator's keen awareness of the world around him both before and during his time also leads him to contemplate human history more broadly. In doing so, he attempts to establish an analogy between Korea's national history and the history of modern Russia. For example, the April 19 Revolution of South Korea in 1960, which put an end to Syngman Rhee's anti-communist dictatorship only to be quickly betrayed by Park Chung-hee's military coup, is re-examined by the narrator as one of the most momentous revolutions in human history, much like the Russian Revolution of 1917. Russia, for him, is first and foremost *a country of revolution*, despite the fact that Gorbachev, in betraying Lenin's legacy, proved that while animals and insects do not regress to earlier stages in development, humans can. The narrator reminds his readers that butterflies never turn into moths, and that frogs never regress to tadpoles, nor chickens to eggs. This kind of degeneration, however, is possible for humans. In the narrator's view, there is a remarkable resemblance between the Russian Revolution and the April 19 Revolution as both events ended in tragic failure after having ignited hope for a better world among the oppressed.

What is crucial here is that the author's rich thoughts are presented in juxtaposition to his reading experience. The autobiographical narrative of *The Keyword* suggests that the author's lifelong process of cosmopolitan reading develops an immense potential to think up and imagine another world. The narrator equates books from all over the world with humans themselves and vice versa. He even identifies the actual world with the conceptual one generated through his readings.

Cosmopolitan Readers, Citizens of the *World of Language*

At this juncture, it is worth noting a striking convergence between Choe's literary practices and Ri's academic as well as journalistic projects. First, the way in which *The Keyword's* narrator refers to the Russian Revolution coincides and overlaps with the context in which Ri examined the Chinese Revolution in his writings. Both revolutions are interpreted in their respective writings as the most monumental events in human history, events that proved humanity's potential to envision alternatives to American-style capitalism.

Second, and more importantly, Choe and Ri alike were committed to finding something unprecedented beyond the binary opposition of capitalism and socialism, something which had long been considered secondary, idealistic, infeasible, and sometimes even subversive, both politically and culturally, by Korean society. Needless to say, Choe's and Ri's respective concerns with such historical events as the Chinese Revolution and the Russian Revolution did not mean they were advocating socialism. However, Korea's political and cultural climate, which was deeply shaped by militarism and the stress on national security during the Cold War period and for decades after, had in the name of national security hindered people from carrying out what might seem unconventional or experimental in any facet of life. Ri and Choe, by contrast, persistently endeavored to liberate themselves from the oppression of their imagination.

From where then does their shared aspiration originate? How and why did Ri and Choe sustain and cultivate it throughout their lives? These questions will not only lead us into a discussion of the integral components of cosmopolitanism in South Korea, but more importantly, also help us see the origin of these characteristics. Ri's and Choe's cosmopolitan inclinations came into being through their respective intellectual projects in which the act of reading plays a crucial part. Although not all reading is emancipatory by nature, as the act of reading printed texts inevitably involves the ideological feature of language and is thus limited by it, Ri and Choe present the fact that a certain repeated performative act of reading such as a cosmopolitan one, through which one actively intermingles personal

history and human history, leads one to emancipate oneself from the logic of nationalism.

Ri Yeong-hui in *Conversations* and Choe In-hun in *The Keyword* emerge as exceptionally voracious readers who desperately pursue cosmopolitan values such as freedom and peace in another, better, more just world. As with *The Keyword*, *Conversations* offers something other than a gallery of the private and virtuous lives of Korean male elite. Instead, it clearly points to a domain of cosmopolitanism in the Third World, a domain where conscientious intellectuals are searching for something unknown yet invaluable, specifically by exposing themselves to the rich repository of the human spiritual heritage.

In short, both *Conversations* and *The Keyword* are striking texts that conjure up the vivid image of those who transcend given circumstances using mental capabilities that have been strengthened by cosmopolitan readings. Therefore, it is unsurprising that the authors emerge as cosmopolitans who do not espouse cosmopolitanism as a fixed ideology but rather pursue it as an ongoing project of reading. In this sense, paraphrasing Spencer, we might say that *The Keyword*, just like Ri's academic practices, is not simply a *cosmopolitan* text but furthermore a text that inspires our *cosmopolitan reading* (Spencer 2011, 16).

The point of departure and the final destination of Choe's literary itinerary are one and the same place; the name of this place is the *world of language*. "As soon as they entered books, the characters became 'citizens of language world' regardless of their nationality. It doesn't matter whether they are Russian or Korean" (Choe 2008, 67). Likewise, when Choe reads books, he does not act as a citizen in a specific nation-state. He tenaciously seeks the position of cosmopolitan reader. As the narrator's early remarks tell us, Choe, just like Ri, suggests that we must try to understand how to think and behave as citizens of the *cosmos* instead of being obsessed with canonizing cosmopolitan texts. What makes *The Keyword* memorable is the way in which it engages with cosmopolitanism. Whether Choe was self-consciously cosmopolitan or not, there is no doubt that far from being mere advocacy for the concept of cosmopolitanism, the text, on a very fundamental level, reminds us that cosmopolitanism exists only as a process.

In What Language Do Cosmopolitans Speak?

If we then turn from the question of reading to that of writing, can we discover anything more or new about Ri and Choe's cosmopolitan position? Despite the resemblances between Ri and Choe as discussed thus far, it is nonetheless important to discern a salient difference between the two. One is their different level of familiarity with the English language. Ri excelled at reading and writing in English, so much so that he was able to obtain access to various sorts of confidential diplomatic documents written in English. His exclusive news reports about the Vietnam War, for instance, were based upon his outstanding English fluency and the robust personal networks it enabled (Choe 2008, 344). By sifting through materials inaccessible to many, Ri was able to unearth many unexposed truths—on both national and international scales. He even wrote several articles for the *Washington Post* in English, bitterly criticizing Syngman Rhee's dictatorial regime. His extraordinary language ability was dramatically improved during the seven years of his military service as an interpreter.

On the contrary, Choe emerges in his autobiographical novel as an ordinary Korean who is unfamiliar with English. The decisive reason for him not following his father's advice to stay in the United States is his inability to obtain a good command of English. He decides to leave the US, where all of his family lives, precisely because he finds his native language perfectly fulfilling as a Korean writer. Choe's personal story spells out how challenging and demanding it is for an artist to be a *true cosmopolitan*, if by that term we refer to those who can write in English like Ri.

Such disparate trajectories between the lives of these two figures suggest an undeniable reality of how tricky it is for an artist of the Third World to be a cosmopolitan writer without resorting to the English language. Their lives also indicate that it is almost impossible for them to challenge the hegemony of English without the help of English, and that even if it were possible it would be fruitless because it would not be heard. This does not mean English-speaking intellectuals from the Third World are superior to those who do not speak English. While English has been and still remains a lingua franca, it would be remiss to sidestep the question of power that

lurks under the broadly acknowledged utility of the English language. Here, we may recall how Gayatri Spivak expressed her critical discontent with imperialism: “Imperialism cannot be justified by the fact that Indians have railways and I speak English well” (Spivak 1998, 333). Indeed, when it comes to cosmopolitan practices both academic and literary, well known is the fact that the most efficient way for writers to disseminate specific values is almost solely via English. Language barriers are not merely obstacles that writers face in expressing their own ideas, but fetters so deeply entrenched within them that they are hard to shake off.

These observations remind us of Pascale Casanova’s discussion of the inequality inherent within what she calls “the world republic of letters.” Writers from “impoverished space” devoid of rich resources both literary and political must struggle incessantly to be counted as citizens of the international literary world because it is hard to gain “membership” in world literature without a credit in “the bourse of literary values.” “Not every writer proceeds in the same way,” Casanova maintains, “but all writers attempt to enter the same race, and all of them struggle, albeit with unequal advantages, to attain the same goal: literary legitimacy” (emphasis in original) (Casanova 2004, 16–40).

Owing to this inequality, cosmopolitans in Korea cannot but experience the conundrum of *in what language should I speak as a citizen of the world?* Whereas cosmopolitans in many developed countries tend to present themselves as transnational guardians of peace, justice, and freedom in the world, cosmopolitans from Korea must first figure out how to enroll themselves in that world. This means that, ironically, the cosmopolitan mind for people in the Third World can be best exemplified in one’s aspiration for *belonging* to the world rather than *being detached* from it. Indeed, their cosmopolitan thinking is oriented toward gaining one’s own voice as a human being rather than keeping distance from national interests. While one of the key traits of cosmopolitanism in the West is what Bruce Robbins called “one’s multiple belongings to places across the borders by refusing particular political affiliation and obligations” (Robbins 2012, 11), for Korean cosmopolitans, an affiliation to the world precedes multiple belongings.

In conclusion, Choe and Ri attempt to emancipate themselves by both physically and spiritually transcending the boundary of self and nation-state. It is China and Russia that in each case emerge as vital places to inspire and expand their cosmopolitan aspirations. In so doing, they go beyond the normative sense of self, time, and space. Their cosmopolitanism is not limited to going overseas. Rather, it is about being liberated *from within*. In their thought and imagination, individuality and humanity, the Korean Peninsula and other continents, personal history and human history intrinsically overlap with each other, constituting a huge net.

The ultimate goal of this essay, however, is not limited to praising or celebrating representative Korean cosmopolitans. Instead, this essay problematizes, interrogates, and deconstructs the premises and achievements of Westernized cosmopolitanism studies from the standpoint of the 21st century by critically reflecting on how the cosmopolitan practices of Ri and Choe embody the possibilities for political dissent by virtue of their critical engagement with the world, as well as residual anxieties as citizens inhabiting that world through the act of reading and writing. And in fathoming the basis of their citizenship, several questions still beg to be asked: just who sets cosmopolitan values? By which language are these values translated and protected? And, finally, in what language do cosmopolitans speak? Cosmopolitanism, after all, is a relentless, unstoppable spirit of relativizing even such values as cosmopolitan ones.

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Received: 2019.05.10. Revised: 2019.07.31. Accepted: 2019.08.16.

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