

Book Review

Youngju Ryu, *Writers of the Winter Republic: Literature and Resistance in Park Chung Hee's Korea* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2016), pp. xii, 235.

Ashley Harbers (Yonsei University)

Youngju Ryu opens *Writers of the Winter Republic* with a claim and a question: insisting that politics is at the heart of South Korean literature, she asks how literature became such a powerful site of resistance in the Korean struggle for democracy in the understudied period of the 1970s. An unpublished poem by Yang Söng-u from 1975 inspires the book's title and provides the epigraph to an insightful introduction, which succeeds in both addressing Korean literature scholars and offering accessibility to non-specialists. Yang's poem, Ryu says, allows a "glimpse [of] the dynamic codetermination of the authoritarian state and the literature of resistance."¹ Asserting an inextricable connection between the writer and his writing, she explains that when Yang refused to resign his teaching position, "the subversive became a dissident," initiating a moment in which "literature became the privileged site of representing a sociopolitical reality that directly contested the official narratives of the state."² In the subsequent four chapters, Ryu explores the tensions between the literary community and the Park Chung-hee regime and between literary purists and writers who found a social imperative in the act of writing.

What separates Ryu from other scholars who have noted the intersections of the political and literary in (predominantly sociological) studies of Korean democratization is not only her argument for the prominence of literature in the resistance movement, but also the

importance of writers themselves. Without the author, Ryu argues, neither literature nor the democracy movement would have survived the turbulence of the 1970s and 1980s. The book makes a significant contribution to Korean literary studies in two other ways: by outlining, in a powerful conclusion, the future prospects for modern Korean literature and ensuring the accessibility of her work to English-speaking scholars. Richly researched, the book serves as an excellent directory for primary and secondary sources in both English and Korean, a relatively rare accomplishment in modern Korean literary studies.

Drawing heavily on the work of Korean sociologists as well as key European theorists of urban modernity (Adorno, Benjamin, and Lukács), Ryu reads four relatively well-known and influential writers of the period through the “trifocal lens” of literary history, critical biography, and textual analysis in order to “inter-illuminate,”³ not merely contextualize, each writer. She also engages bibliographic criticism, specifically the politics of serial publication and censorship, tracking ideological rifts and splits in the publishing world in relation to the prevailing political tide. For each chapter, she maintains the same organizing principle: historical context, biographical context, textual analysis. Although the pattern may feel repetitive to some readers, this consistency enables Ryu to produce innovative readings of interest to the practiced Korean literature scholar and appeal to readers from other disciplines or areas of literary studies. She does not oversimplify an inherently complicated topic; rather, she takes great pains to explain aspects of the text that defy translation, a common obstacle in this kind of research.

Another helpful organizational strategy for the four chapters, which could easily be read as discrete essays, is Ryu’s isolation of a trope favored by each writer, illuminating connections between his works and the wider resistance movement of the decade. The first chapter explores dissident poet Kim Chi-ha’s figuration of the bandit, a not-so-subtle reference to the corrupt practices of the Park Chung-hee administration. The second chapter articulates how novelist Yi Mun-gu’s figuration of the neighbor criticizes the atomization of society under a totalitarian regime that asked neighbors to surveille each other and report subversive activities. The third chapter considers perhaps the most

widely recognized writer of the era, Cho Se-hui. Ryu reads the often-discussed figure of the dwarf in Cho's collection of linked short stories as a symbol of arrested development, a natural consequence of what Chang Kyung-Sup has famously called Korea's "compressed modernity."⁴ Cho's experimental style confounded those who sought to affix a genre label to his work and reinvigorated the colonial-era debates around modernism and realism. The final chapter addresses the problem of gender in 1970s fiction and engages the trope of the drifter as an embodiment of stifled mobility in the labor fiction of Hwang Sok-yong. Finally, an optimistic conclusion addresses the future of Korean literature in a neoliberal world, inviting consideration of new modes of resistance for contemporary writers.

In the first chapter, "On Trial: Kim Chi-ha's Bandits," Ryu considers three of Kim Chi-ha's works: "Eulogy for Ethnonational Democracy" (1964), composed for student protests against South Korea's normalization of relations with Japan, the famous satirical poem, "Five Bandits" (*Ojök*, 1970), and the transcript of Kim's 1976 trial at which he gave a three-hour closing statement. Ryu views "Eulogy" as an "indispensable text in understanding Kim Chi-ha's emergence as the Winter Republic's premier dissident poet,"⁵ reading it as a philosophical forerunner to his satire, while the trial transcript extends the folk-performativity of "Five Bandits" to his own courtroom drama. Ryu includes this text to reinforce her argument that "the trial process as a whole became the site of articulation and performance of dissidence in ways that rendered its transcript a dangerous text in its own right."⁶ All three works express Kim's scathing critique of Park Chung-hee's strategy of "modernization in lieu of decolonization, development in lieu of autonomy,"⁷ the regime's corruption and extension of biopolitical control over the population.

Ryu next elucidates the history of the formation and division of various writers' associations in the chapter "Proximity over Identity: Yi Mun-gu's Neighbors." Here, she highlights Yi's ability to bridge ideological divisions among groups of people, which, in his writing, enacts the intention to "combat the logic of identity-formation that undergirded nation building."⁸ Ryu thus understands "both Yi Mun-

gu's life and his works as profound indictments of the violent attempts at nation building in twentieth-century Korea."⁹ These indictments often assume the guise of interrogating the relationship between form and meaning; the serialized novel *Dream of Everlasting Sorrow* (1970-71), for example, while it "preserves the category of the novel, the form itself, like the corpses [in the story] laid open to view, undergoes disintegration in the text."¹⁰ Ryu's subsequent textual analyses of Yi's *Kwan'ch'on Essays* (1977) and *Our Neighborhood* (1977-81) reveal the harshness of the Yusin era for the agrarian class to be a consequence of the "penetration of capitalist and consumer culture into the countryside."¹¹

In the book's most extensive chapter, "Arrested Development: Cho Se-hui's Dwarf," Ryu re-reads Cho's linked fiction (*yŏnjak sosŏl*) not only as bearing witness to the plight of the urban poor, but also as a text that disrupts the attempts of critics and publishers to separate fantasy from reality in terms of genre or style. Ryu considers *A Dwarf Launches a Little Ball* (*Nanjangi ka ssoaollin chagŭn kong*) "a book of profound political commitment and moral vision"¹² and a continuation of Yi Mun-gu's exploration of class issues in terms of neighbor relations. She also considers how the critical reception of *Dwarf* has reflected opposing ideological and aesthetic positions, situating the novel "within the vicissitudes of South Korean literary scholarship over the past four decades, especially in terms of the sustained debate between realism and modernism."¹³ With its experimental style, using "montage as the primary aesthetic principle"¹⁴ to address unresolved oppositions, the collection eludes categorization as either labor fiction or fantasy. What has been missed in the critical debate, Ryu contends, is that Cho "opens up an ethical plane that raises the question of alterity" in both form and meaning, most visibly by "mapping the figure of the neighbor onto that of the dwarf."¹⁵ Ultimately, Ryu concludes that the modernist-realist debate over *Dwarf* "is theoretically unsophisticated at best and ideologically motivated at worst"; nevertheless, the work possesses "historical importance for the way it forced the Korean literary field to articulate competing views about literature's mission and method."¹⁶

In her last chapter, "The Call to Action: Hwang Sok-yong's Drifters," Ryu considers six short stories that criticize the regime's "technology of

mobilization”¹⁷ and the displacement of communities by the forces of industrialization. Ryu finds it appropriate to end with Hwang, for he is the only writer among the four to emerge from the political turbulence of the 1970s and the labor movements of the 1980s as a *minjung* writer, his fiction reaching “the eve of the revolution,” or “the point where the people are poised to turn into the site of counter-hegemonic agency.”¹⁸ Reading Hwang as a writer whose own professional mobility enabled him to continue his political engagement after the end of the Park regime, Ryu offers her only real criticism of one of the Winter Republic writers. While she addresses issues of gender in Hwang’s fiction in the form of its one-dimensional representation of women, it seems this criticism could be expanded to the other writers as well. In most cases, female characters, if present at all, function as embodiments of suffering rather than resistance.

In answer to her opening question: What is a politics of literature?, Ryu determines that, then as now, it “consists of waging the fight to apprehend, make visible, and resist the conjuncture of forces that makes human life less than humanly livable.”¹⁹ So, as the second decade of the new millennium approaches its close, the question may no longer be whether or not literature enacts a resistant space, but what exactly literature resists. In a brief discussion of contemporary writer Park Min-gyu, a self-identified writer of resistance who channels elements of all four predecessors, Ryu proposes an answer. Reading Park as an indicator of the potentialities of contemporary Korean literature, some of the unique consequences of neoliberalism in South Korean society—a high youth suicide rate, a surplus of university graduates in the labor market, an inordinate number of irregular workers, the recent Sewol ferry disaster—could be considered alongside the debt peonage and corporate slavery plaguing most of the world’s “economically advanced” neoliberal countries. These aspects of “unlivability,” subsumed under the term “Hell Joseon” in contemporary South Korea, thus merit the resistance of writer and critic alike.

From her exploration of the bandit to the neighbor, dwarf, and drifter, Youngju Ryu’s approach—using close textual analysis while knitting together the historical, biographical, and bibliographical to

focalize the political in the literary—is an innovative exemplar for future studies in modern Korean literature. Challenging old readings and inviting new ones, *Writers of the Winter Republic* is accessible to a wide range of scholars and does what the best research should: it serves as a springboard for further debate, reflection, and critical intervention, pointing the way for continued research into the literature of the 1970s.

Notes

Youngju Ryu, *Writers of the Winter Republic: Literature and Resistance in Park Chung-hee's Korea* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2016), 4.

² *Ibid.*, 4, 5.

³ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁴ Kyung-Sup Chang, “Compressed Modernity and its Discontents: South Korean Society in Transition,” *Economy and Society* 28, no. 1 (1999): 30-55.

⁵ Ryu, *Writers of the Winter Republic*, 36.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, 65.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 67.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 80.

¹² *Ibid.*, 134.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 103.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 104.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 103.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 126, 134.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 139.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 140.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 185.