

Resource Notes

Classes, Voices, and Spaces in South Korean Literature: The Importance of Cho Se-hŭi's *The Dwarf*

The recent passing of popular author Cho Se-hŭi (1942-2022) in late December 2022 has revitalized a strong interest in his work—work often referred to as reportage (Korean *rep'o*) that captured vividly the effects of rapid industrialization in South Korea in the late 1970s. Cho's groundbreaking work, *The Dwarf* (난장이가 쏘아올린 작은 공, literally *A Little Ball Launched by a Dwarf*), in both form and content, demonstrates the disjointedness and uneven development that occurred during the Park Chung Hee dictatorship (1961-1979). What began as short stories published in newspapers starting in 1975 eventually culminated in a 220-page novel in 1978, stitching together narratives from different classes, genders, and ages. And as a member of the so-called *Hangŭl* Generation (a generation of writers who wrote strictly in Korean, unlike their predecessors who wrote or were forced to write in Japanese), Cho's work describes attempts to piece together identities and subjectivities that are oppressed, overworked, or just out of reach. Now, after almost fifty years since publication of *The Dwarf*, perhaps in an act of reverence or sheer continuity of craft, it is quite fitting that a recently discovered treasure-trove of Cho's unpublished written observations, diary-like entries, and storylines all concerning the Kwangju Massacre of 1980 and spanning decades, is slated to be stitched together¹ to once again tell of a South Korea that was and arguably still is unrelentingly pushing forward through tensions in the name of progress. We may begin to understand Cho's authorial explorations by delving into the intricacies of his first major work, *The Dwarf*. The novel is available in English, the most circulated edition translated by Bruce and Ju-Chan Fulton. Though complicated, the novel is a great resource for teaching in classes housed in Korean, East Asian, or Postcolonial Studies.

As a novel, this work is not particularly easy to pin down to any specific genre and navigates through both realism and surrealism, mixing in a tinge of science fiction, only to come back to realism again. It is also told from multiple perspectives, making the narrative not completely linear; yet, like the rapidly industrializing urban context in which it is so firmly grounded, it marches forward nonetheless. The story, as the title suggests, circles mostly around a dwarf, who is a kind of handyman, and his family that includes two sons and a daughter. They are of the low economic class, best indicated by their home being poorly built in a shantytown (*p'anjach'on*) on the outskirts of the developing city. The dwelling in which they reside is at constant threat from wealthy real estate developers. The city, though never explicitly named in the text, bears strong resemblance to the cities of Incheon (Inch'ŏn) and Seoul, with the urban centers and factories and shantytowns for workers on the peripheries. In addition, *The Dwarf* also has important chapters that include young men from both the middle and upper classes, who reside in the better parts of the city. The inclusion of individuals of various classes in the text, to be discussed later in this essay, is perhaps the most important aspect of the work that allows readers to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the socio-economic context in which it was written. Thus,

¹ There is no specific release date yet, or any concrete information about how exactly this will happen. But this information was published by the left-leaning newspaper *Han'gyŏre*. Source: Mun-yŏng Lee, "chosehŭiŭi migonggae not'ŭ "urin chigiman halji morŭnda, kŭrŏna... [Cho Se-hui's Unpublished Note: 'We may just lose, but...']", last modified March 6, 2023, <https://www.hani.co.kr/arti/culture/book/1082114.html>.

this novel provides us with insight to the developments and shifts of twentieth-century Korean literature. It also provides us with potential and critical connection to a larger discussion of postcolonial literature. Much like other postcolonial nation-states under authoritarian rule during the Cold War period, South Korea in the 1970s was being shaped by the Park regime's developmentalist ideology that was driven by both a Korean ethno-nationalism and a desire to enter the global stage of capitalism through its industrialization. And literary works like *The Dwarf* reflect such complications of postcolonial nation-state formation, as well as the individual's place within it.

But before getting to the content of the novel, its connection to the industrializing nation that surrounded it warrants a deeper exploration of the development of the urban areas (particularly Seoul) and the rise of *chaeböl* (conglomerate) largely responsible for that development. This will help establish a more firm grasp of both the economic growth and divisions that were created around these conglomerates and factories and how the concept of space reflected those changes. In my opinion, because this is quite a complicated topic that involves both economic and urban planning issues (in addition to the sociological and psychological aspects to be discussed in the novel), as part of an already-complicated era of developmental dictatorship, it is worth spending a full class covering these topics.

There are at least two texts that will be useful in providing proper context to students regarding state-corporation relationships that constitute a large part of the context of the novel. The Ŭngang corporation in *The Dwarf* is the quintessential representation of such a relationship. The first text that opens up a wider lane of knowledge on the topic of the *chaeböl* is Chapter 9 of *The Park Chung Hee Era: The Transformation of South Korea*, edited by Byung-Kook Kim and Ezra F. Vogel. The chapter entitled "The *Chaebol*" by Eun Mee Kim and Gil-Sung Park goes into great detail to explicate all the intricacies of the foundations of the *chaeböl* (including influence from the Japanese Meiji-era *zaibatsu*) and how lucrative government contracts and funds not only led to rapid development of factories and jobs, but also to extreme increases of disparities in class difference and poor working conditions. The latter is perhaps best shown in the factory scenes, in which managers walk around pricking the sleepy young workers with needles and giving them amphetamines to stay awake through all hours of the day and night. The entirety of Kim and Vogel's book provides a far-reaching and in-depth description of all things economic, social, political, etc., related to the Park Chung Hee era; the essay on the *chaeböl* is particularly helpful for context-building purposes, if not for students, then for instructors to help students understand that aspect of *The Dwarf* or of the political and economic conditions in which it takes place.

The other text that would provide a great deal of insight into the economic and spatial aspects of the novel is Jini Kim Watson's *The New Asian City: Three-Dimensional Fictions of Space and Urban Form*. Specifically concerning *The Dwarf*, the "Introduction" and Chapter 3 "Narratives of Human Growth versus Urban Renewal" go into detail about the Park Chung Hee regime's developmentalist projects that included destruction, construction, reconstruction, and everything in between that often left individual residents and families (particularly of the lower laboring classes) to fend for themselves. But before getting into specific texts (several are covered in the book), Watson clearly relates one of the main arguments in the "Introduction" to tell readers that her work is not necessarily concerned with cultural or individual psychological issues, but the physical spaces in which those issues occur and replicate and spread. Bringing in the important

and highly debatable topic of the postcolonial state, Watson is conscious of just how much development, in all senses of the word, can play out and vary:

I use literary and cinematic texts not for their privileged access to any cultural or subjective truths, but as historical palimpsests that register the most profound contradictions of postcolonial development. In other words, I explore a particular strand of postcolonialism that can best be understood in terms of the struggle over space rather than over culture or identity. I suggest that there is a kind of postcolonial historical development whose primary process is spatial and architectural transformation, a process most clearly registered in the figures and displacements taken up in various fictional texts.²

Watson argues that, especially in a postcolonial context like South Korea, literature is undoubtedly linked and in constant dialogue with all kinds of development in various spaces. Crucially, Watson highlights the importance of considering development as a discourse, not just a material process. In fact, rather than just being focused on “sites or buildings themselves as empirical objects,” her research is geared toward the “*logic* and *form* of developmental spaces—accessed through the fictional text....”³ *The New Asian City* thus “argues that the massive shift in urban forms produces a particular kind of fictional text, one that foregrounds the complex realities and conflicts of these transformations.”⁴

As a general resource for analyzing urbanization, architecture, and space in postcolonial nation-states and their impacts on psychological and physical growth (the main character of *The Dwarf* is actually a dwarf, representing bodily harm and a stunted growth due to various outside pressures), Watson’s text is enlightening. More specifically, though, for our purposes here, Watson’s analysis of *The Dwarf* as a clear and significant example of the explicit link among the state, *chaebŏl*, architecture, urban space, and the body is, in my opinion, quite important, especially if there has been no previous exposure to literature of the Park Chung Hee period. Watson gives a remarkable “introduction” to the novel that is sure to draw in readers about these topics and how they are represented in the novel in a scene where the dwarf is contemplating suicide after failing his family:

The image of the dwarf atop the smokestacks reveals a range of conflicts and struggles at different scales: the precarious physical and psychical state of the squatter family; the ruthlessness of Seoul’s urban renewal; the emerging opposition between working and middle classes; the architectural replacement of low-rise squatter settlements by high-rise buildings; and—at the largest scale—the new global economic system in which postcolonial Korea competes as an export manufacturer.⁵

But, as Watson points out, it is important to note that although these connections between the self and the larger entities that control and manipulate it are apparent, it is not always easy to peel away

² Watson, Jini Kim, *The New Asian City: Three-Dimensional Fictions of Space and Urban Form* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 7-8.

³ Watson, *The New Asian City*, 5. Emphasis in original.

⁴ Watson, *The New Asian City*, 2.

⁵ Watson, *The New Asian City*, 9.

all the layers. As Watson states, the novel should read as neither as one containing “one-to-one, transparent relationships,” nor “as abstract, metaphorical textual inventions.”⁶ Here, Watson is helping us reconsider how we examine literature from a postcolonial context, that our analyses may lead us to conclusions that are not black and white but include aspects of both. Watson’s specific kind of analysis and critique, when combined with the essay mentioned above on *chaebŏl*, should lead to productive conversations about the landscape (both seen and unseen) of urbanizing and industrializing South Korea in the 1970s. As stated before, when taken in tandem, these two texts will take up quite a lot of time, but the content is crucial in establishing proper context, especially when discussing a novel whose “disjointed style [...] echoes the fragmented status of a certain city.”⁷

This last quote leads us nicely into the novel itself. It is indeed a fragmented or disjointed work, yet it is linked coherently (this type of work is technically a *yŏnjak sosŏl*, or linked novel, which is a collection of individually published stories that can be connected or stand by themselves). When read together as a full-length novel, though, all the political, economic, architectural, and social landscapes become much clearer, and at the same time, much more at odds with each other. The main factor that contributes to this is the novel’s structure of being told from multiple points of view, mostly through the characters who are in their late teens. Though not Korean, one source that may help students understand this choice of style is the work of Mikhail Bakhtin. Two terms from Bakhtin come to mind when considering a work like *The Dwarf*: polyphony and heteroglossia. The former, to me, almost always leads to the latter; and it is also a potentially simpler concept to explain. Polyphony, in its most basic (literary) sense, is the use of multiple points of view. In writing about Bakhtin’s theories, Caryl Emerson describes polyphony as “a decentered authorial stance that grants validity to all voices.”⁸ For Cho and *The Dwarf*, these last few words are especially pertinent. Here, not only does each character receive his/her own space to tell their stories, Cho does, too. Not only within the frame of the novel in which it is told third-person; the entire novel was written in Korean script, *Hangŭl*. As mentioned earlier, Cho was part of the so-called *Hangŭl* Generation, the first to write works exclusively in *Hangŭl*, rather than in Japanese or Hanja (Chinese characters). The novel therefore not only grants validity to the characters who are of different classes but also to its author. This may open up conversations with students regarding the form of the novel and whether Cho’s stylistic choice makes sense, or if it can be seen as problematic or even confusing, as, to repeat, the novel was not originally a novel, itself being a product of weaving together characters and plot points. The use of *Hangŭl*, in particular, may lead to deeper conversations of postcolonial nationalism, given the Park Chung Hee regime’s adamant arguments to preserve the Korean Han people’s “fatherland,” which would presumably include its language and script, particularly after Japanese colonialism (1910-1945).⁹ But conflicts arose when national projects were directly influenced by Park’s brand of ethno-nationalism. One such conflict in the construction of a new South Korean identity was that language itself became a point of contestation: Cho’s act of writing in only *Hangŭl* frees him (in some sense) from Japanese colonial oppression that surely surrounded him in his younger years;

⁶ Watson, *The New Asian City*, 9.

⁷ Watson, *The New Asian City*, 11.

⁸ Caryl Emerson, “Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975),” *Filosofia: An Encyclopedia of Russian Thought*. Dickinson College, April 2019. Accessed April 2023, <https://filosofia.dickinson.edu/encyclopedia/bakhtin-mikhail/>

⁹ For a deeper look into nationalism from Park Chung Hee himself, see *Major Speeches by Park Chung Hee* (Seoul: Samhwa Publishing, 1974).

but at the same time, the different perspectives of his characters are in conflict with the Park regime's goals for postcolonial and industrializing South Korea, which takes us into Cho's use of Bakhtinian heteroglossia.

The concept of heteroglossia is thoroughly explicated in Bakhtin's essay, "Discourse in the Novel," from *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Most pertinent to a discussion regarding an understanding of how heteroglossia may be applied to *The Dwarf* is the section titled "Heteroglossia in the Novel."¹⁰ According to Bakhtin, heteroglossia is the presence of a variety of "points of view on the world, forms for conceptualizing the world in words, specific world views, each characterized by its own objects, meanings and values."¹¹ This means that in one official language, there are undoubtedly numerous variants of that language. And although Bakhtin was operating more or less in the realm of linguistics, for our purposes here I think it is no stretch to enter into the realm of socio-economic issues. In *The Dwarf*, its multiple points of view are tied to different "languages" because of class distinctions that became more and more disparate as the 1970s wore on. There is a plethora of examples of differences in "language" in the text, but two come to mind for now. The first is a scene in which workers are gathered in a mass at the Ŭngang factory to demand better wages. The scene is actually written in play form, an arguably comedic one, with various characters being named titles such as Worker I or Manager II. As the scene goes on, the managers become more and more distracted, nonchalantly forming phrases and sentences that are off-topic or merely non-responses. They are obviously "speaking" Korean in the scene, but one can argue that it does not matter, since their "languages" are positioned at different economic levels (i.e., manager and worker), further complicating the issue of a national identity that, under Park's plan, they were supposedly supposed to have, regardless of class. It gets to a point where the two sides seem to be simply speaking past, rather than with, each other. The other scene includes a character, Yun-ho, who is of the middle-class, but who becomes wrapped up in Marxist ideology after a few sessions with a laboring-class tutor with leftist views named Chi-sŏp, albeit in a naïve manner. In an odd scene in which a group of youths are engaged in a meeting about the rights of workers (though they all pretty much come from non-working-class families), Yun-ho pretends to put a girl (who admits her feelings for him) on a torture rack, in order to get her to confess her "crimes" (she is the granddaughter of the owner of the Ŭngang *chaebŏl*). Yun-ho pretends to turn the rack tighter, demanding that she confess to making the poorer classes starve and be cold at night. But she has no way to respond, as she does not know what he is talking about—she is indeed well-off—but she is also just a teenager who has a crush on Yun-ho. Here again, though in a very different way, points of view based on economic class lead to issues of severe misunderstanding. Heteroglossia can be another means of exploration for students when reading *The Dwarf*, and it is certainly not limited to class differences. For example, most characters in the text are male, but its female characters are not of little importance. Questions of voice and gender in *The Dwarf* should indeed be brought to the forefront, especially considering the era, which was filled with hypermasculinity, no matter if the author was right or left.

Finally, as the novels weaves between realism and surrealism mixed with science fiction and ends with the sentencing to death of an angry young man who lashed out and stabbed the wrong rich man, and a teacher who claims he's going to space, comprehension may become elusive.

¹⁰ Though all arguably relevant, the entire essay is perhaps too long to assign in tandem with the novel, but this particular section is found from pages 275-331 in the 1981 University of Texas Press version.

¹¹ Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 291-292.

But one scholarly source may come to the rescue. As one of the leading English-language scholars specializing in Korean literature from the Cold War period, Youngju Ryu offers her own thorough critique of the novel. She focuses on, among other things, issues of knowledge, love, and law in her chapter entitled, “Arrested Development: Cho’s *Dwarf*” in her *Writers of the Winter Republic: Literature and Resistance in Park Chung Hee’s Korea*. Of particular note are her explanations of the Mobius Strip and Klein Bottle. Both objects possess neither an inside nor an outside, which compels characters *and* readers to question their positionality, and whether it even matters in an industrializing society that places modernization ahead of individuals and their rights. The essay is quite dense and may be difficult to fully grasp at first, especially with its philosophical references concerning epistemological issues (including those of Hume and Žižek), but it is nonetheless an excellent guide to *The Dwarf*.

It was the witnessing of physical destruction of a family dwelling, so the story goes, that inspired Cho Se-hŭi to write what was to become *The Dwarf* over the course of the late 1970s,¹² to great acclaim and criticism. Then, at the thirty-year anniversary of publishing in 2009, despite a huge resurgence of interest in the book that made it a best-seller, Cho expressed his disappointment. According to Cho, the popularity of the novel meant that the issues he wrote about three decades prior were unfortunately still relevant,¹³ and arguably even more severe than before, which makes the novel that much more necessary to read today. *The Dwarf* is an intricate and important novel, though it is certainly not immune to criticisms of all kinds. Cho’s most famous work remains a crucial part of modern Korean literature and provides a strong insight to the complicated and precarious era of the Park Chung Hee developmental dictatorship and today’s South Korea that is its outcome.

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¹² Ryu, Youngju “Arrested Development: Cho Se-hŭi’s *Dwarf*,” in *Writers of the Winter Republic: Literature and Resistance in Park Chung Hee’s Korea* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2016), 100.

¹³ Ryu, *Writers of the Winter Republic*, 133-134.