CHU CHONGGŎN (1895–1936): LIFE AND DEATH OF A TRANSBORDER KOREAN SOCIALIST INTELLECTUAL

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INTRODUCTION

The present article deals with Chu Chonggŏn (1895–1936) – one of several founders of the underground Korean Communist Party (1925) who ended up being executed during the Great Purges in the Stalinist Soviet Union.[1] The primary motivation for writing this paper was dearth of research focusing on Chu, despite his significance for the history of Korean Communist movement, and Korean social movements of the 1920s in general. It has to be remembered that Chu was, for example, one of the main protagonists in the polemics around the Korean Products Promotion Society in the early 1920s (see Wells 1985: 843). He was also one of the major popularizers of Marxism in 1920s Korea. Back then, he was known for his work at Minjungsa, the main Marxist publishing house in Seoul (Pak 2018: 108–110), and as an editor of an important early Communist journal, *Chosŏnjigwang* (on the journal, see Kim & Kim 1986: 295; on Chu's involvement, see RGASPI f. 499 op. 228 d. 399, pp. 21–22). The most important reason for his relative obscurity even in South Korean historical research (no biographical articles specifically on him could be found in South Korean academic journals) seems to lie in the (in)accessibility of sources. As we will see below, Chu moved to Soviet Union in 1927 and never returned to Korea. This period of his life is known mainly from his Comintern (Communist International, 1919–1943) file, currently kept in the RGASPI (Russian State Archives for Socio-Political History) in Moscow. This file was definitely not easily accessible for South Korean researchers. Moreover, as the present article makes clear, even this archive does not provide us with enough material to reconstruct the full story of Chu's life in his Soviet exile. We still do not know, for example, the exact date

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of his death (1936 is assumed, since the last document in RGASPI collection is dated as early 1936, with no further mentions of Chu in documents or literature).

Aside from the author's ambition to reconstruct the picture of Chu's life in Korea, Japan and the Soviet Union, and his activities before and after his flight to Soviet territory, the article strives to answer a question which inevitably strikes anybody researching on Chu. Why did this brilliant Marxist propagandist and popularizer, a famed polemist from early 1920s' Korea, end up as a completely marginalized figure in Moscow, unable to even obtain permission to work with Korean students at the Comintern-run Communist University of Oriental Toilers (KUTV)? Why was Chu denied political trust and pushed into peripheral areas of Communist activity by Comintern, the organization to which he professed loyalty, and which acknowledged – through academically-minded representatives like Lajos Magyar, 1891–1937, a recognized Communist Sinologist – his talent as a Marxist researcher? As I will argue in my article, this denial of trust was grounded in a cardinally important trait of Comintern's organizational culture, namely its emphasis on "background" and various indications of "belonging", rather than individual merits or achievements. As Chu happened to belong to a non-mainstream Shanghai network inside the Korean Communist movement, he was neither allowed to participate in the Korea-related political work of Comintern or to return home for underground work (see RGASPI f. 499 op. 228 d. 399, p. 23 for a frank statement of the reasons why Chu, a "factional element", could not be sent back to Korea). This "formula of failure" in one's Comintern career, which the trajectory of Chu's life makes clearer, may be an important reference for research on Communist movements of the 1920–1930s in general, inside the framework of a wider sociology of anti-systemic and protest movements.

CHU CHONGGŎN – A NATIONALIST-TURNED-MARXIST

While most sources agree that Chu was born near Hamhŭng (Southern Hamgyŏng province, currently in North Korea) in 1895 (according to a questionnaire he himself filled out he was born on 19 January, see RGASPI f. 499 op. 228 d. 399, p. 24), his social origins – an important point in the Soviet classification of "belonging" – remain a moot point. He himself wanted – for understandable reasons, given the preferences which Comintern used to accord more authentic "representatives of the oppressed classes" – to picture himself as the son of a peasant (RGASPI f. 499 op. 228 d. 399, p. 33) while Comintern understood him to be the son of a county magistrate (RGASPI f. 499 op. 228 d. 399, p. 23). Given that, according to Chu's autobiography, he attended a primary school in Chŏngp'yŏng sub-county (*ŭp*) near

Hamhŭng in 1906-1909 (RGASPI f. 499 op. 228 d. 399, p. 50), his connections with rural Korea, in any case, are beyond doubt. These connections may explain the direction which Chu's subsequent academic trajectory took. In 1909–1912, he attended an agricultural middle school in Hamhŭng and, upon graduation, went to Tokyo. There, after two years at preparatory school, he obtained enrolment at Tokyo Imperial University's Agricultural College, which he graduated from in 1916 (RGASPI f. 499 op. 228 d. 399, p. 50). His willingness to study agriculture may indeed indicate rural origins, but his family, apparently, was well-to-do enough to defray his tuition fees and other expenses related to study, both in Korea and in the colonial metropole.

It was apparently in Tokyo in 1912–1916 that Chu's political socialization took place. An article he published in a Korean student journal in 1915 suggested that his general worldview at that time could be characterized as reformist Social Darwinism. He claimed that reform of "outdated customs" was Korea's only chance to survive in the Darwinian jungles of the modern world, where only the fittest could avoid "national extinction" (Chu 1915). Given the degree to which Social Darwinism was central to the intellectual life of Korea's modern intelligentsia from the first decade of the twentieth century (Pak 2003: 45–70), Chu's infatuation with this current of social thought was rather predictable. However, the student of agriculture from the Hamhŭng area was also interested in more radical dimensions of modern politics. As he himself later reported to Comintern, in January 1917 he was admitted into Paedal Moŭm "Korean Gathering", an underground secret society devoted to Korea's liberation (RGASPI f. 499 op. 228 d. 399, p. 50v). As we know now, this secret society was established in 1911 in the wake of Korea's full colonization (1910), by disciples of the noted nationalist linguist, Chu Sigyŏng (1876–1914), and, indeed, sought to liberate Korea, via armed struggle if necessary (Yi 2003: 139–151). In other words, at the moment when he returned to Korea in late 1916 or early 1917, Chu, a graduate of the metropole's highest-ranked university (Tokyo Imperial University), was a Social Darwinist nationalist, prepared to fight for the restoration of Korea's lost statehood.

Chu's nationalism did not prevent him, however, from first gaining employment with the colonial provincial government in Hamhŭng in March 1917. According to his own description, he was supervising the provision of credit to Korean peasants (RGASPI f. 499 op. 228 d. 399, p. 50). The official registry of the colonial government's public servants lists him as a provincial secretary at the Second Department of Southern Hamgyŏng's provincial government (*Chōsen sōtokufu* 1918: 303). The young nationalist, though, did not intend to work for the colonial government for long. He quit Japanese governmental service in

less than a year and thereafter worked, until August 1919, at a private company, Taesŏngsa, which specialized in the purchasing and retail sales of Korean peasants' agricultural produce (RGASPI f. 499 op. 228 d. 399, p. 50). It is interesting to note that Chu officially resigned as Taesŏngsa's representative only in April 1922 (*Chōsen Sōtokufu Kanpō* 1922), a fact he conveniently omitted while writing his autobiography for his Comintern hosts later in Moscow.

However, even if private business activities guaranteed Chu his livelihood, his true interests lay elsewhere. Radicalized by the experiences of the 1 March 1919 pan-national independence demonstrations (RGASPI f. 499 op. 228 d. 399, p. 32v), Chu reconnected with his old Paedal Moŭm network and, together with them, established – in June 1920 – an illegal left-nationalist group, ambitiously named the "Social-Revolutionary Party" (RGASPI f. 499 op. 228 d. 399, p. 50v). The party was led by a number of key activists – including Hong To (1894–?), a Meiji University graduate, and Yi Pongsu (1892–?), a Meiji University dropout – who, like Chu, were from Southern Hamgyŏng and had studied in Japan (Yi 2003: 159). Known to have close to 900 members and sympathizers, this party soon became, in essence, a domestic Korean branch of the Shanghai Communist Party – the network of radicalized Korean émigrés based mostly in China and the Russian Far East, many of whom were originally nationalist activists but later, like Chu Chonggŏn or Hong To, converted to Marxism. Soon, the merging of the Shanghai Communists and the Social-Revolutionary Party was cemented by the participation of an eight-strong delegation of the latter – which included Chu – to the inaugural congress of the Shanghai Communists' Korean Communist Party, held in Shanghai in May 1921. Chu was one of the four cadres of the newly formed party charged with publishing the party's printed organ (Im 2003: 378–380; RGASPI f. 499 op. 228 d. 399, p. 50v). That was the official start of Chu's activist career.

CHU CHONGGŎN – POPULARIZING MARXISM IN KOREA

The former governmental official-turned-businessman can be described as one of the main organizers of Korea's underground Communist movement in the early 1920s. The Communists, a secret underground conglomerate of diverse groups and cells prior to the establishment of the underground Korean Communist Party in 1925, wanted to intervene in and, if possible dominate, legal mass organizations. One such organization was the pan-Korean Korean Youth League (Chosŏn Ch'ŏngnyŏn Ch'ongdongmaeng), formed on the initiative of the Shanghai Communist network in April 1924, with Chu as a member of its

Control Commission (RGASPI f. 499 op. 228 d. 399, p. 53). Another important mass organization the Communists worked with was the Korean League of Workers' and Peasants' Unions (KLWPU), formed simultaneously with the Youth League. The KLWPU represented more than 90 regional groups (Kim 1982: 122), possessed over 50,000 members and is regarded now by labour historians as an important factor in post-1924 intensification of industrial disputes all over the country (Kim 1985: 237, 241). It was understood by the Japanese police to be under the dominant influence of the Korean Communists' Seoul faction – the domestic extension of the Shanghai Communist network which Chu belonged to (Kyōshōkōkei hi dai 285-gō). So, Chu's claim that he participated in managing the KLWPU as a Communist front group (RGASPI f. 499 op. 228 d. 399, p. 53) may be seen as very likely true. His name, in fact, is mentioned in the list of the preparatory committee members who worked to prepare for the inaugural congress of the KLWPU (*Tong'a Ilbo* 1923). Besides that, Chu was active as the editor-in-chief of Minjungsa, an important early Marxist publisher, and as an editorial board member of *Chosŏnjigwang*, a major Communist journal (RGASPI f. 499 op. 228 d. 399, pp. 21–22; RGASPI f. 499 op. 228 d. 399, p. 52). Such a combination of managerial positions at both large-scale mass organizations and Marxist publishing enterprises made Chu into one of the main nodes in the network of radical activists who constituted Korea's Communist movement in the early 1920s.

From the viewpoint of Korean Marxism's ideological history, however, Chu's activities as a Marxist popularizer are, perhaps, even more important than his participation in Communist front organizations. While Chu was not a major factional leader of the Shanghai Communists' domestic network inside Korea – the Seoul faction – he definitely was one of the Marxist popularizers whom educated readers of the early 1920s' Press were supposed to know. As mentioned above, Chu became rather famous among the educated Korean public after *Tong'a Ilbo*, a popular nationalist daily, serialized in 1923 his longish Marxist rebuttal to anarchist Na Kyŏngsŏk's (polite sobriquet – Kongmin, 1891–1959) attempt to advocate for cross-class cooperation in promoting Korean-made goods under the auspices of the Korean Products Promotion Society. Chu claimed that the whole project of substituting the non-existent protective tariffs by a "buy local" mass movement would further impoverish, rather than benefit, the "oppressed masses of toilers". His main point was the necessity of viewing the project from a class – rather than a vaguely "national" – perspective (Chu 1923a). It is important to remember however, that, typically of the Shanghai Communists – who were more moderate and more inclined towards cooperation with the broader national movement – Chu made clear his willingness to collaborate with the more radical

elements in the nationalist camp. He himself explained that the national movement naturally radicalizes into a social movement when it encounters issues of class exploitation and the immiseration of the exploited (Chu 1925). This claim sounds more than natural given that Chu himself represented a case of a nationalist who eventually converted to the socialist cause.

Being also one of the Korean Youth League leaders, Chu duly produced a popular piece on the history of socialist youth movements. Since the Belgian Young Guards (Jeunes Gardes, formed in 1886) were famed for their anti-militarist work, Chu named them, other like-minded organizations of youthful socialist radicals in fin-de-siècle Europe, and the International Union of Socialist Youth (IUSY), inaugurated at the international socialist youth meeting in Stuttgart (1907) and led by militant socialist icon Karl Liebknecht (1871–1919), as the main predecessors of the Korean socialist youth movement. In this way Chu placed the movement he was leading into the spatial-temporal framework of global militancy which, he hoped, was following the teleologically predestined course towards building a classless society via worldwide class struggle. As Chu (1923b) hoped, the educated and class-conscious youth of Korea might partially replace the still weak proletariat in its role as leader of the class struggle, helping to organize and push forward the social struggles in the countryside – where most Koreans lived at that time. Being concurrently an organizer of the KLWPU, Chu additionally wrote down and published as a journal article a long and detailed record of a conversation between a Marxist intellectual and a skilled worker whom his interlocutor was attempting to win for the socialist cause. The text, perhaps based on Chu's own real-life encounters and exchanges with labour activists from the shop floor, once again repeats Chu's main points of disagreement with the Korean Products Promotion Society advocates. As Chu saw it, small-scale Korean manufacturing had, in any case, no chance in competition with incomparably bigger Japanese rivals and its development, even if it could take place, would do little to alleviate the suffering of Korea's toiling masses who were exploited by both the metropolitan and local bourgeoisie. Introducing Marxian terms like "surplus value" (*ing'yŏ kach'i*) and "the tendency of the profit rate to fall" (*suik chŏmgam ŭi pŏpch'ik*), Chu argued that any improvements in productivity would only swell the exploiters' profits. He further maintained that, barring the destruction of "wage slavery" and the private property system, the suffering of the workers or tenant farmers could not be meaningfully alleviated (Chu 1923c). While hardly a specially innovative or pioneering piece, this article, nevertheless, was supposed to help popularize Marxism's basic tenets in Korea.

ARREST, RELEASE AND FLIGHT TO THE SOVIET UNION

Popularization of Marxism per se was not technically illegal in 1920s colonial Korea, but participation in underground Communist activities definitely was. Chu's role in these activities was constantly prominent, although he definitely wasn't a major factional leader or a liaison between Korean Communists and Comintern. Being officially employed in 1924 as an economic history lecturer at the prestigious Posŏng College and a journalist at a major daily, *Sidae Ilbo* (RGASPI f. 499 op. 228 d. 399, p. 50), Chu was concurrently an active participant in efforts at organizing diverse Korean Communist groups into one single party. When the inaugural meeting of the underground Korean Communist Party took place in Seoul on 17 April 1925, Chu was the only member of Shanghai Communist network to participate or to be elected onto the Party's Central Committee (RGASPI f. 499 op. 135 d. 110, pp. 132–139; the document is also published in Wada & Shirinya 2007: 328–333). Chu's Central Committee membership was an important milestone in his career as an underground militant, and he routinely introduced himself as "Korean Communist Party's Central Committee member" when interacting with Comintern authorities (see, for example, RGASPI f. 499 op. 228 d. 399, p. 49).

Chu's work as a Central Committee member in 1925 was the apex of his underground career. It lasted, however, only for about seven months, during which time Chu was responsible for the Tongnae regional bureau of the party as well as its central Research Bureau (Chosabu) (Chŏn 2004: 34–35). The gradual development of the underground party was interrupted after a casual fistfight between some Party members and pro-Japanese local dignitaries in Sinŭiju on the Sino-Korean border ("Sinŭiju Incident", 22 November 1925) ended up in the Japanese authorities securing the Party's secret documents and arresting more than a hundred of its members (Chŏn 2006: 287; Kajimura & Kang 1972: 36). Arrested in November 1925, Chu spent then more than seven months, until July 1926, in colonial Korean prisons where, in his own words, he could not work and was subjected to "bestial torture" (RGASPI f. 499 op. 228 d. 399, pp. 53). Indeed, prison conditions seemingly were bad enough for Chu to contract tuberculosis there and to be found, by prison medics, sick enough to merit a release on bail for medical treatment (RGASPI f. 499 op. 228 d. 399, p. 46). The release was valid until September 1927. However, the new underground Central Committee of Korean Communist Party, on the understanding that Chu's weakened body would not endure any more stays in Japanese prison cells, paid him a 100 yen travel allowance and instructed him to illegally cross into Soviet territory. Chu followed their instructions and arrived in Vladivostok on 11 September 1927

(RGASPI f. 499 op. 228 d. 399, p. 49). Interestingly, the boat which Chu used to cross the border river, Tumangang, was said to belong to the Party and to be in regular use for illegal crossings to Soviet territory (RGASPI f. 499 op. 228 d. 399, p. 21v). Obviously, the Korean-Soviet border was still porous back in 1927, an important factor allowing Korea's Communist movement to maintain a continuous, tight connection with Comintern's centre in Moscow and its representatives in Vladivostok.

According to Chu's own description, his Korean Central Committee colleagues initially wanted to use him for doing their own assignments on Soviet territory, as he was based close to the Korean border, in Vladivostok, and concurrently receiving tuberculosis treatment (RGASPI f. 499 op. 228 d. 399, p. 44v). However, it was only the latter part of the initial plan that Chu succeeded in implementing in practice. Entrusted into the reliable hands of International Red Aid (MOPR, for its modus operandi in the 1920s see Ryle 1970), Chu obtained the badly needed tuberculosis treatment in Crimea and Orenburg in May–June and then August 1928 (RGASPI f. 499 op. 228 d. 399, p. 44v). Again, he received long-term treatment in Yalta, Crimea, from January to September 1929 (RGASPI f. 499 op. 228 d. 399, p. 53v), although securing these precious nine months of medical attention and procedures required a special intervention by Comintern authorities (RGASPI f. 499 op. 228 d. 399, p. 45). However, by that point Chu was already a Communist without a party – the Korean Communist Party he used to belong to, weakened as it was by repeated Japanese police repression, was declared non-existent by Comintern on December 10, 1928 (Wada & Shirinya 2007: 574–575). There was no longer any legitimate Korean Central Committee to give assignments to its former member who now was de facto exiled in the Soviet Union for good. Since he had broken the conditions of his release on bail, a return to Korea could mean new imprisonment, and, most likely, a new tuberculosis attack (RGASPI f. 499 op. 228 d. 399, p. 49). Now a permanent migrant rather than a temporary political exile, Chu had to find himself a place to belong to and work in Soviet Russia. As we will see below, despite his outstanding record as a revolutionary publicist in Korea, Comintern was in no hurry to make use of his manifold talents.

A FRUSTRATED KOREAN COMMUNIST IN MOSCOW

It should be made clear from the beginning that Chu apparently strove hard to win the confidence of his Moscow hosts. While at the end of 1928 his Russian (and English) proficiency was limited to reading sources ("with dictionary": RGASPI f. 499 op. 228 d. 399, p. 49v), by the close of 1932 his Russian writing

skills were already good enough for him to compile his brief autobiography in readable Russian handwriting (RGASPI f. 499 op. 228 d. 399, p. 24v). To attenuate his willingness to assimilate into Soviet political culture, Chu adopted by the end of 1930 a new nom de guerre, "Soltz", apparently after Aaron Soltz (1872–1945), a famous Old Bolshevik known as "the conscience of the Party" (on his revolutionary merits, see, for example, Serge 1972 [1930]: 171, 217). Yun-In, his original revolutionary pseudonym (RGASPI f. 499 op. 228 d. 399, p. 1), sounded too distinctively Korean and evidently had to be changed to something more closely associated with Russo-Soviet revolutionary culture. However, the cultural mimicry was of little help: Chu's adjustment to his new life in the capital of the Soviet "motherland of proletariat" progressed, despite all his efforts, at an excruciatingly slow tempo before being definitively stopped in the whirlwind of the mid-1930s Stalinist repressions.

A job Chu was qualified for and a stable income were the first priority. After his arrival in Soviet territory Chu, as a recognized political refugee, could rely on a rather meagre political immigrant subsidy (27 rubles a month, equivalent to circa 14 contemporary American dollars; on exchange rates, see Holzman 1968: 814), and, in his own words, he lacked the needed nutrition (RGASPI f. 499 op. 228 d. 399, p. 44v). Having helped Chu in treating his tuberculosis, Soviet Russia was tormenting him with extreme penury. An appeal by Chu at the end of 1928 to Otto Kuusinen (1881–1964), then the mighty secretary of Comintern's Executive (RGASPI f. 499 op. 228 d. 399, p. 44–45v), eventually helped, albeit not immediately. After a year of precarious living in Moscow, starting from December 1929 Chu was at last employed as assistant professor (docent) of Japanese at the Narimanov Oriental Studies Institute in the Soviet capital (RGASPI f. 499 op. 228 d. 399, p. 24v). This job gave him an income amounting to 250 rubles per month (RGASPI f. 499 op. 228 d. 399, p. 52), making him a member of the Soviet capital's salaried middle class. His teaching career, however, lasted less than two years. From 6 December 1931, the former member of the Korean Communist Party's Central Committee worked as an editor of the Korean editions of Lenin's works at the Foreign Workers' Publishing House in Moscow (RGASPI f. 499 op. 228 d. 399, p. 24v). Basically it was Comintern's publishing house of Communist – and general – literature in foreign languages (on its Korean language productions in the 1930s, see Son 2020). But being sent to work there, rather than at Comintern's central apparatus or one of its educational institutions, indicated a lower degree of political confidence.

This lack of confidence revealed itself in a variety of ways. To be accepted as a full-fledged "soldier of world revolution", a part of Comintern's activist milieu, Chu had to formally shift his membership from the defunct Korean Communist

Party to the Soviet Union's ruling All-Russian Communist Party (Bol'shevik). This was, however, easier said than done. Chu petitioned Comintern's Executive, asking them to allow him to transfer his Party affiliation to the Soviet Party (2 February 1930: RGASPI f. 499 op. 228 d. 399, p. 40–40v), and relatively easily acquired support from such prominent Korean Communist exiles in Moscow as Kim Tanya (1899–1938) and Pak Hŏnyŏng (1900–1956) (8 March 1930: RGASPI f. 499 op. 228 d. 399, p. 38). While both Kim and Pak belonged to the Tuesday faction – the domestic extension of the Irkutsk Communist network, the old rivals of the Shanghai network which Chu belonged to (Scalapino & Lee 1972: 55–59) – they apparently had enough respect for Chu's role in the founding of the Korean Communist Party back in 1925 and in Marxism's popularization in Korea. The matter was then debated by Comintern's International Control Commission (3 May 1930: RGASPI f. 499 op. 228 d. 399, p. 37) after one more appeal by Chu (2 May 1930: RGASPI f. 499 op. 228 d. 399, p. 36). However, it was left undecided and sent to the Soviet Communist Party's Central Committee for review (3 May 1930: RGASPI f. 499 op. 228 d. 399, p. 31). There it apparently lay dormant for a year and a half until Chu lodged a new appeal, mentioning, inter alia, that lack of Party membership was making his work at the Foreign Workers' Publishing House significantly more difficult (24 January 1932: RGASPI f. 499 op. 228 d. 399, pp. 29–29v). This appeal had to be re-lodged once again ten months later (8 October 1932: RGASPI f. 499 op. 228 d. 399, p. 26), apparently because of the Soviet Party authorities' failure to respond to the first one. The new appeal led to a new review which found that Chu had managed, by that point, to obtain Soviet citizenship and was supported by Pavel Mif (1901–1939), the famed director of Comintern's Communist University of Oriental Toilers (KUTV) and an important brain behind the Soviet Communist Party's policies on China (22 October 1932: RGASPI f. 499 op. 228 d. 399, p. 28). With the official sponsorship of Comintern's Oriental Bureau which Mif then headed (31 October 1932: RGASPI f. 499 op. 228 d. 399, p. 25) the appeal was, at last, successful. A month and a half later Chu was allowed to fill out the questionnaire for the transfer of his membership to the Soviet Party (16 December 1932: RGASPI f. 499 op. 228 d. 399, pp. 24–24v). It is noteworthy, however, how complicated the transfer procedure Chu had to undergo was. The manifold reviews he had to go through signified a serious lack of political confidence in him on Comintern's part.

This lack of confidence was also made clear by Chu's failure to ever secure any teaching position at the Communist University of Oriental Toilers (KUTV) where Comintern's Korean cadres were trained. According to his own account (dated October 1930), the chief of KUTV's general history department once asked

him to teach – presumably, history – to the Korean students there. However, he had to rescind the offer when it was found out that some influential Comintern cadres doubted Chu's allegiance to "Comintern's line on Korea" (RGASPI f. 499 op. 228 d. 399, pp. 17–18). Chu was allowed to conduct "Party work" (apparently, Party propaganda work is meant) at an ethnic Korean workers' club in Moscow and to be enrolled as a graduate student (*aspirant*) at the Institute of World Economy and World Politics (RGASPI f. 499 op. 228 d. 399, pp. 17–18). However, the confidence Comintern had in his allegiance to its orthodoxy obviously did not stretch any further than that. Chu's supervisor at the Institute of World Economy and World Politics was Lajos Magyar, Comintern's noted Sinologist, with whom Chu vainly pleaded in October 1930 for help in finding "practical" (most likely, pedagogical) work (RGASPI f. 499 op. 228 d. 399, p. 19). Chu's proven academic abilities and his illustrious record of Marxist popularization in Korea were seemingly of little help to his cause. Where were the roots of distrust he suffered from?

THE ROOTS OF DISTRUST

Comintern's file on Chu contains a denunciation which, judging from its content, refers to Hong To (1894–?), a Meiji University graduate who had worked with Chu since the days of the late 1910s' Paedal Moŭm network and then as a fellow activist of the Social-Revolutionary Party and the Shanghai Communist network (the denunciation is marked by Chu's name, but it refers to a "Meiji University graduate", obviously Hong To). The denunciation accused Hong of harbouring "nationalistic anti-Soviet sentiments" and being related to Ch'ŏndogyo "The Heavenly Way", a new Korean religion which inherited the religious legacy of Tonghak "Eastern Learning". The latter was known for its association with the 1894–1895 peasant rebellion (RGASPI f. 499 op. 228 d. 399, p. 35; the standard work on Tonghak-Ch'ŏndogyo connection is Young 2014). The accusation of "anti-Soviet sentiments" was hardly true to the facts: Hong, who, like Chu, himself chose to flee to the Soviet Union (in 1928) and was then enrolled at the Communist University of Oriental Toilers (RGASPI f. 495 op. 228 d. 384 pp. 25–26) was very unlikely to be "anti-Soviet". However, it was indeed true that the Shanghai Communist network of which both Chu and Hong were prominent members, was much keener on cooperation with Ch'ŏndogyo in the 1920s than its more orthodox rivals from the Irkutsk Communist network and the Tuesday faction (Yi 2009: 211–216). It was also clear that Chu remained a part of the Shanghai network even after he left for Moscow. The person who guaranteed – in writing – Chu's trustworthiness in January 1933 was a fellow Shanghai

network militant, Yi Sŏngt'ae (1901–?), who had known Chu as one of his co-workers since the times of publishing work at Minjungsa and *Chosŏnjigwang* editorship (see above; RGASPI f. 499 op. 228 d. 399, pp. 21–22). At the ethnic Korean workers' club in Moscow, Chu worked alongside Pak Ae (Matvei Pak, 1896–), a Russian-born Korean who was among the founders of the Shanghai network (RGASPI f. 499 op. 228 d. 399, p. 17v; see Kim 1979: 17–19, 65 on Pak's early career). It appears that it was precisely Chu's continuing and active membership in the Shanghai network that proved his undoing.

This hypothesis is supported by Comintern cadres' assessments of Chu found in his file. A 1933 assessment characterizes Chu as a "factional element close to [the] Shanghai group" and concludes that, as such, he should *not* be entrusted with underground work inside Korea proper (RGASPI f. 499 op. 228 d. 399, p. 23). A 1933 assessment of Chu by Pak Minyŏng (Pak Nikifor, 1902–1938), then a KUTV teacher, mentions his Shanghai network membership as well (RGASPI f. 499 op. 228 d. 399, p. 20). The label of a "factional element" seemingly made Chu's political position significantly more vulnerable than that of other Korean Communist exiles in Moscow. In addition to being excluded from teaching at KUTV and from any position of responsibility at Comintern, Chu – just as his old friend Hong To – was among the first to be arrested. Hong was taken by Soviet secret police on 19 December 1935, from his house in a small village, Ust'-Sidimi, in Russian Far East, where the former Korean revolutionary leader had been de facto exiled to as a vice-director of the local Machine-Tractor Station in charge of political propaganda. He was sentenced to five years' penal labour for being a "Japanese spy", and was never seen again (Ku-Degai 2004a: 226). He was exonerated only in 1955 (Ku-Degai 2008: 89). Chu was arrested even earlier, on 8 April 1935. However, he seemingly refused to admit his guilt, and by August 1935, his case was sent back for re-investigation (Ku-Degai 2004b: 138). The 1935 arrests of Chu and Hong followed in the wake of the 1933 arrests of Kim Yŏngman (1898–1934) and Kim Kyuyŏl (1883–1934), two veterans of the Shanghai Communist network who, identically with Chu, worked during the last years of their lives at the Foreign Workers' Publishing House in Moscow. In 1934, both were shot. Chu, as well as Kim Yŏngman and Kim Kyuyŏl, were named as "unreliable factional elements and self-centred megalomaniacs" already in 1933 by Fyodor Kotel'nikov (1895–1971), a mighty Stalinist functionary at Comintern's Personnel Bureau (RGASPI f. 499 op. 135 d. 191, pp. 50–51; the document is also published in Wada & Shirinya 2007: 652–654). That such a document appeared was a clear sign than, as early as 1933 the political downfall of Shanghai Communist exiles in Moscow was imminent. By contrast, the majority of the known Moscow-based leaders of the Irkutsk Communist network or the Tuesday faction were left untouched until the

major wave of Stalinist repression in 1937 (Son 2013: 254–321). Obviously, being a Shanghai-affiliated Communist could represent a major disadvantage for a Korean revolutionary émigré in mid-1930s Moscow.

CODA: A FAILURE TO ACCUMULATE THE POLITICAL CAPITAL OF TRUST

Released from prison, but deprived of his Party membership and his erstwhile editorial job at the Foreign Workers' Publishing House, Chu spent late 1935 and early 1936 in anguish and utter hopelessness. On 8 January 1936, he wrote a desperate plea to his long-standing patron, Pavel Mif, asking for *any* job to feed his wife and children. He mentioned that he had been positively assessed by Alexander Gambarov (1890–1937), the director of the Oriental Studies Institute, but his employment there was impossible without Party membership. Ch'oe Sŏng'u (1898–1937), an influential ethnic Korean cadre at the Comintern apparatus, promised, according to Chu, to support his bid for reinstatement in the Party. The promise was issued on the understanding that Ch'ŏndogyo, the connections to which incriminated Chu and other Shanghai Communists, was once a revolutionary religious group; thus, Chu was not guilty of any "deviations" (RGASPI f. 499 op. 228 d. 399, p. 7). Apparently, however, the Soviet secret police held a different opinion. On 6 March 1939, an anonymous assessment of Chu by the Comintern mentioned that he was originally accepted as a political exile and that there was no way to find out whether he was still alive and where he was (RGASPI f. 499 op. 228 d. 399, p. 6). Ch'oe Sŏng'u's July 1936 assessment of Chu suggested that he could be perhaps sent for low-responsibility underground work to Korea on probation, "in order to examine him", as long as the Soviet authorities did not have any objections (RGASPI f. 499 op. 228 d. 399, p. 4). Apparently, their "objections" were real enough since Chu's dossier file does not contain any chronologically later-dated documents. Chu's anguished letter to Mif mentions his works on agrarian issues in Korea and Japan, on Korea's industrial development and a brochure on Japanese colonial rule in Korea which was supposed to be published but was then halted at the last minute due to Chu's arrest and loss of Party membership. Chu lamented that his manuscripts would "lie unseen [by the people] for very long time" (RGASPI f. 499 op. 228 d. 399, p. 7). What happened in reality was much worse, since his manuscripts disappeared without a trace, never to be seen again. We know that Chu was exonerated by the Soviet authorities (Chief Military Prosecutor's Office) on 23 June 1958 (Ku-Degai 2004b: 138). Alas, nobody knows for sure when he was arrested and shot, and what happened to the family he left behind.

Chu was without doubt a Communist activist and Marxist propagandist with many gifts, both academic and practical. A graduate of Japan's most prestigious university and a former lecturer at Posŏng, one of Korea's best-known colleges, he possessed near-native proficiency in Japanese – which he successfully taught in Moscow – and could read and write both Russian and English, apparently also developing considerable Russian conversational skills over time. He was a highly adaptive transborder intellectual who – as a protégé of Pavel Mif and Lajos Magyar, the two most noted Sinologists of Comintern – managed to become a part of local academic-political networks after his arrival in Moscow in 1927. He was considered academically qualified to teach at Comintern's Communist University of Oriental Toilers (KUTV) – he never taught there, though, but for purely political reasons. He was also considered qualified enough to be commissioned to translate Lenin's texts into Korean as a part of his work at the Foreign Workers' Publishing House. Much of the Comintern milieu he belonged to – including Mif, Magyar, but also such Korean Comintern cadres as Ch'oe Sŏng'u – was destroyed by Stalinist Great Purges of 1937–1939. Chu's political downfall, however, was visible as early as 1933. Accepted into the Soviet Communist Party, he was still seen as an "unreliable factionist" and kept in largely technical posts, sidelined from the mainstream of Korean Communist political work at Comintern institutions, and destined to be arrested earlier than many of his fellow political exiles. What does his marginalization, so incongruent with his proven abilities as a Marxist populariser and Communist practitioner, say about the workings of the Comintern system as a whole?

As the documents analysed above demonstrate, Comintern represented a complex, hierarchically organized machine, in which the trusted Soviet and foreign cadres (typified by Kotel'nikov and Kuusinen) as well as highly trusted Soviet-Korean functionaries (typically, Ch'oe Sŏng'u) from its Moscow centre were charged with assigning tasks, ranks and positions to the entrants from different peripheries, Korea included. Some of the entrants, like Chu, could be relatively highly placed in their own regional hierarchies. However, the Moscow centre would re-assess them based on its own criteria, political trust being the central factor. Such trust could be accumulated as long as the peripheral Communist in question was free of any compromising complexity – that is, from anything smacking of independent organizing on the ground ("factional activity"), belonging to any hostile groups ("exploitative classes") or organizations (government or private enterprise). Academic merits could play a role – the educated entrants, like Chu, were still given editorial or translation-related jobs rather than purely clerical or manual ones – but they were not decisive, and neither were any achievements they might attain. Chu typified the high-ranked peripheral entrant

whose accumulation of trust, all their efforts at acculturation notwithstanding, was greatly impaired by their social background, non-Communist contacts and long history of rather independent political activity outside of Soviet borders. After a number of humiliating pleas, he was allowed to integrate economically into Soviet Moscow's salaried professional middle-class, but never fully integrated politically into Comintern's Korean milieu in which the political network he originally belonged to (the Shanghai network) was regarded as non-mainstream and "suspicious". In the end, he was excluded and eventually eliminated by the Stalinist secret police apparatus at a relatively early stage; a couple of years before the same fate befell most Korean political émigrés in Moscow.

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