



A Borderland Radical: *The Life and Struggles of Heo Seongtaek (1908–?), a Korean Anti-Colonial Revolutionary*

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Abstract

The present article explores the life and struggles of Heo Seongtaek (1908–?), a typical peasant (and later worker) grassroots militant of 1920–1930s colonial Korea. He actively participated in both the post-1945 radical labor movement and subsequently in the establishment of the North Korean regime, and was purged after the regime consolidated in the 1950s. The radical peasant movement of the northern Korean county of Seongjin—of which Heo was one of the leaders—was characterized by a combination of spatial dynamism, mobility, and varied repertoires of resistance. These repertoires creatively blended technically legal, a-legal and illegal forms and techniques of struggle. The chosen forms of resistance varied, including both legal reading societies, a-legal mass meetings, and illegal coercive and violent methods (forced destruction of debt documents, anti-spy struggles against police informers etc.). Both a-legal, and especially illegal, methods could invite police repression but were also conducive to solidifying the counter-hegemony of the peasant radicals.

Keywords: colonial Korea, communism, peasant union, Heo Seongtaek, Comintern, counter-hegemony, cultural capital

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Introduction

Heo Seongtaek (1908–?) is primarily known to Korean history researchers as the charismatic leader of Jeonpyeong (Joseon nodong johap jeonguk pyeonguihoe, or the National Council of Korean Labor Unions), a leftist union confederation formed in November 1945 in the wake of Korea's liberation and with its center in Seoul. The confederation, an amalgamation of 16 union federations from all the major industries, boasted 194 local chapters and over two hundred thousand members (An 2002, 106–120). The leading force in the process of mobilizing the workers for the September 1946 general strike (Jo 1995), it was subsequently suppressed by the US occupation authorities and eventually made illegal after the government of the Republic of Korea (South Korea) was formed in August 1948.¹ Arrested in February 1947 and imprisoned for almost a year by the American authorities, Heo eventually went North. He served there as an official in several capacities, as the first minister of labor (1948–1949), vice-minister of transport (from 1954), full member of the Workers' Party Central Committee (from April 1956), and minister of the coal industry (1957). There is no evidence of public activities after 1959, so he is generally understood to have been purged around that time.²

However, not unlike some other prominent North Korean politicians of the post-liberation period, Heo also possessed illustrious credentials as a grassroots anti-colonial activist in Korea proper before 1945. As I will detail below, he was active in the youth and later the peasant and workers' movements from the mid-1920s, studied in Moscow between 1933 and 1937, and then, after being sent back to Korea, languished for eight years in colonial prisons after a failed attempt to restart his underground communist work. His pre-1945 anti-colonial activities are amply documented, both in several autobiographies preserved by Comintern archives in Moscow (now

1. The suppression is described in detail in Chang (2016).

2. In South Korea, Heo was believed to have been purged at some point before October 1961, since from that time his name no longer appeared in the list of Central Committee members and other lists of North Korean dignitaries. See *Dong-A ilbo* (1961).

included into RGASPI, the Russian State Archive for Socio-Political History) and in colonial-period Korean newspaper reportage and Japanese police documents. It is this rich documentation that the recent article on Heo by Prof. Im Gyeongseok (Sungkyunkwan University, Seoul), the dean of South Korean research on communist movement history, builds upon (Im 2021a). The present article, utilizing largely the same first-hand sources (with a heavy focus on Heo's dossier from the Comintern archives), will attempt to further explore the repertoire and methods of Heo's struggles. It will likewise endeavor to reconstruct the counter-hegemonic space that such revolutionaries as Heo struggled to create through their acts of organized resistance, using Heo's own written narratives as well as third-party records (newspaper articles etc.). In the end, it will trace the continuities between Heo's activities in the 1930s and his work as a major radical labor leader in post-1945 South Korea.

The anti-colonial resistance in which Heo and his comrades were engaged was taking place in the highly asymmetric contest vis-à-vis the coercive power of colonial modernity. As I will argue, under such conditions resistance needed to develop an array of practices, some technically legal, some clearly illegal, and many others lying in the grey zone of a-legality (on a-legal resistance practices, see Hughes [2019]). Some of these practices involved a-legal and illegal border-crossings that worked to link up the grassroots resistance activities in provincial Korea with the Moscow-centered global anti-systemic movement of the interwar period (1918–1939). I will attempt to demonstrate that taken together these mutually complementary practices ultimately aimed at creating a counter-hegemonic (Gramsci 1971, 57) space with its own normative regime. To an extent, this endeavor achieved a degree of local visibility, if not success, in at least some borderland zones of Korea—typified by Seongjin county, Heo's birthplace—in the early 1930s. Despite censorship, the publications in colonial Korean press helped to make the radical struggles in Seongjin and other peripheral localities nationally visible. It is hoped that this research may contribute to a deeper understanding of the challenges to the colonial governance regime from the revolutionary underground, especially in such a time and place as Korea's rebellious Hamgyeongbuk-do borderland after the onset of the

world depression in 1929.³ Furthermore, I will attempt to trace the legacies of colonial-age resistance repertoires in the post-1945 practices of Jeonpyeong and to deal with the context of the ultimate political downfall of Heo and other former grassroots resistance leaders in North Korea, to the early nation-building to which they significantly contributed.

Korea's revolutionary ('red') peasant unions of the 1930s have been studied in North Korea since the 1950s (see a critical review of this literature in Kim Gyeongil [1989, 39–64]) and by a number of South Korean and American scholars since the late 1980s.⁴ Specific studies on the revolutionary peasant unions in certain areas of both Hamgyeongnam-do (Sin 1989) and Hamgyeongbuk-do (Ji 1991) provinces have appeared, giving us a very comprehensive outline of how peasant revolutionaries of northeastern Korea in the 1930s combined legal front organizations (reading societies, consumer cooperatives etc.) and illegal work. In addition, these studies narrate in detail how peasant revolutionary organizations were related to the political movement that aimed at eventually rebuilding the underground Korean Communist Party. Even earlier, an elaborate study of the revolutionary peasant movement in the Hongwon area of Hamgyeongbuk-do was produced in Japan (Namiki 1983). However, none of the existing studies deal specifically with the radical peasant movement in Seongjin, Hamgyeongbuk-do province, the scene of Heo Seongtaek's revolutionary activities and the focal point of the present research. Moreover, the existing research does not specially foreground transborder mobility as an important element in the 1930s upsurge of resistance in the Hamgyeongbuk-do countryside. The present article will focus on this point, hoping to provide an in-depth account of the particular combination of local embeddedness and revolutionary globality that characterized the radical movement in Korea's northeastern borderlands of the 1930s.

3. On rural polarization in post-depression colonial Korea, see Woo (2007). On the upsurge of left-wing peasant resistance in the north-eastern periphery of colonial-age Korea, see for example, Shin (1996, 76–113).

4. The most important monographic works on the issue include, but are not limited to, Ji (1993), J. Yi (1993), and Shin (1996).

Heo Seongtaek's Activities before 1930: Formative Period of a Grassroots Radical

According to his autobiography in Korean, written and submitted to Comintern on his arrival in Moscow in 1933, Heo Seongtaek was born in 1908, in Punghodong hamlet, Hangnam subcounty, Seongjin county of Hamgyeongbuk-do province (RGASPI, f. 495 op. 228 d. 134, p. 12). This hamlet stands almost on the coast of the East Sea (Sea of Japan), about 20 km south of Seongjin (now Kimchaek), at that time a growing industrial center (*Hokusen nichinichi shinbun* 1933), later to become a hub for special steel production (*Busan ilbo* 1936). Close to the Soviet border, Seongjin was also known—from the mid-1920s—as a hub of socialist radicalism. The first communist-oriented group had already emerged there in 1924 (Kang and Seong 1996, 116). In common with many other grassroots socialist leaders, in Seongjin and elsewhere, Heo was not necessarily a typical proletarian himself. His father, Heo Eullyeon, according to Heo himself, owned 4,000 *pyeong* (ca. 1.3 ha) of arable land (RGASPI, f. 495 d. 228 op. 134, p. 12). By 1932, ca. 4,500 *pyeong* (1.5 *jeongbo*) would be the average size of arable land per peasant household (Ju 1971, 152), so Heo Eullyeon was close to a typical middling peasant. Perhaps he was, however, somewhat better off than the average since, unlike about 69 percent of Korean peasants who were fully or partly tenants by the early 1930s, he owned the land he cultivated.

Childhood was short in the world of the middling peasants of northeastern Korea in the 1920s. Heo Seongtaek had to work from the tender age of ten (RGASPI, f. 495 op. 228 d. 134, p. 11). As the second (and not the eldest) son, he was not entitled to study at the government-run primary school (RGASPI f. 495 op. 228 d. 459, p. 15). In 1918, when Heo Seongtaek turned ten, only about 10 percent of Korean boys attended governmental schools (B. Kim 2009, 88), so a second son of a middling peasant without the chance to undertake formal schooling was a typical phenomenon. For the lack of better options, Heo Seongtaek had to attend a classical Chinese school, *seodang*, from age 12 to 16, but only during the less busy winter season. Three months of *seodang* attendance per year would cost only 4 *yen* (RGASPI f. 495 op. 228 d. 459, p. 15). By contrast, attending

a government primary school would typically cost about 8 *yen* per year. The 4-*yen* differential could make a big difference, even for a relatively well-off rural family whose disposable earnings would amount to about 8 *yen* per month (B. Kim 2009, 112). The *seodang* was a popular choice among middling and even poor peasants, whose children could learn basic classical Chinese and Korean vernacular writing there (B. Kim 2009, 83). Heo Seongtaek ended up being able to read Korean newspapers' mixed Sino-Korean script, and even read *The Communist Manifesto* in Japanese without Japanese fluency, simply by identifying the familiar Sinitic logographs (RGASPI, f. 495 d. 228 op. 134, p. 12). In a country where, by 1930, 77 percent of the population were entirely illiterate (M. Kim 2004), Heo—as many other local-level anti-colonial resistance leaders—belonged to a more enlightened vanguard.

By 1924, Heo was already married and thus considered a full adult. His wife, Yi Eogeum, according to his description, fought incessantly with her in-laws, wishing to establish an independent household. That would cost additional money, and Heo went to the Soviet Union to earn the needed sum. He spent ten months of 1925 working on the farm of a richer Korean peasant, a certain Mr. An, near Nikolsk-Ussuriysk, earning the equivalent of 100 *yen* and returning to Korea in December of that year. This a-legal border crossing, apparently without any permits, did not lead to any police persecution back in Korea (RGASPI, f. 495 d. 228 op. 459, p. 1). According to Heo, he simply took a wooden boat in Cheongjin harbor and reached Soviet territory by sea (RGASPI f. 495 op. 228 d. 459, p. 15), ostensibly being smuggled across the border. The episode demonstrates the degree to which the Soviet border remained porous to the inhabitants of the northeastern Korean borderlands in the 1920s.

It looks as if a cross-border sojourn in a post-revolutionary state strongly influenced the young and literate peasant from Punghodong. Already in 1924—before his trip to the Soviet Union—Heo had had a brief experience as a member of Sinyanghoe, a local “enlightenment” (*prosvetitel'skaya*) adolescent group (RGASPI, f. 495 op. 228 d. 134, p. 11). On his return to Korea, he bought a small plot of land and was eventually able to establish an independent household (RGASPI f. 495 op. 228 d. 459, p.

15v). Interestingly, Heo had frankly confessed to his Soviet hosts that, due to his overwhelming interest in social movements, most economic decisions were taken by his wife (RGASPI f. 495 op. 228 d. 459, p. 16). Heo's genuine interest, on his return from the Soviet Far East, was the *chaekkye*, an educational association he founded. Its members paid 50 *sen* to gain membership and had to contribute one day's work a year to the association, the money from which was used for buying books and organizing evening literacy courses (RGASPI, f. 495 d. 228 op. 459, p. 1; RGASPI f. 495 op. 228 d. 459, p. 16v). Perhaps one of the references for Heo's attempts to spread literacy in his village was the mid-1920s illiteracy liquidation campaign among the ethnic Koreans of the Soviet Far East, which Heo might have encountered while staying there. This campaign was a success, lifting the proportion of literate Koreans there up to 90 percent by 1930.⁵ In this way, cross-border mobility apparently played an important role in stimulating grassroots organization. Initially started for *enlightenment* purposes, this educational association eventually became a predecessor to the radicalized peasant group this article will focus on.

From the summer of 1926, Heo's activities crossed the boundaries of his hamlet. After a countywide youth group, Seongjin cheongnyeon yeonmaeng (Seongjin Youth League), was founded on July 1, 1926, by a group of educated youth in their early 20s (*Dong-A ilbo* 1926), Heo promptly joined it and became the head of its agitation and propaganda section (RGASPI, f. 495 op. 228 d. 134, p. 11). Later, while studying in Moscow, he characterized Seongjin cheongnyeon yeonmaeng as a "reformist" (that is, non-revolutionary) organization (RGASPI, f. 495 op. 228 d. 134, p. 11). However, with Marxist-Leninist socialism steadily spreading throughout Korea from the early 1920s, Seongjin's activists were radicalizing as well. A number of Seongjin natives who had earlier migrated to northeastern China were highly visible in the Korean communist movement there. A few organizers of the Korean Communist Party's regional branch in Gando (Jiandao), the Chinese border zone with a high proportion of ethnic Koreans—such as

5. It was only 21.7 percent in 1922, roughly on par with Korea proper. See Boris Pak (1995, 141–143).

Kim Gyugeuk (1884–1934) and Hyeon Chunbong (Hyeon Chilchong, 1898–?)—were originally from Seongjin, for example.⁶ The radical winds inevitably influenced Seongjin's youth activists too. Kim Chaeryong (1905–?), the leader of Seongjin's Cheongnyeon dongmaeng (the successor organization to Cheongnyeon yeonmaeng) from December 1927, was concurrently a member of the Seongjin *yacheika* (cell) of the Korean Communist Party (Kang and Seong 1996, 130). Such was the backdrop against which the radicalization of Heo—at that point a local-level grassroots militant in the youth movement—took place.

Heo Seongtaek's Activities in 1930–1933: Years of Living Dangerously

According to his own description, Heo joined the local peasant union in February 1930 when he was 22 (23 by Korean counting) (RGASPI, f. 495 d. 228 op. 134, p. 13). The union, as colonial police found out later, had eleven local chapters (*jibu*) and twenty-eight groups (*ban*), with close to one hundred active militants and several thousand peasants acknowledging their leadership (*Joseon jungang ilbo* 1934a). After joining the union, Heo, thanks apparently to the authority his literacy and prior activism experience commanded, assumed a leading role in local-level actions. He organized the celebration of Labor Day on the first of May in the mountains by the peasant union's members. The Japanese police found out about the event and came to disperse it, forcing Heo into hiding (RGASPI, f. 495 d. 228 op. 134, p. 13; RGASPI f. 495 op. 228 d. 459, p. 16v). The conditions of hiding did not prevent Heo from continuing his anti-colonial struggle by illegal and a-legal methods. When three former political prisoners from Seongjin were released from prison by the Japanese authorities and, on their way home, arrived at Seongjin railway station on January 18, 1931, they were met by a column of more than two thousand local peasants, red banners in their

6. See the prison sentence meted out to them by the Japanese colonial authorities in 1928 (NAK, Showa 3-nen Kei Kō Dai 541-3gō Keijō Chihō Hōin), and also the translation into Korean in Jeon (2020, 257–300).

hands, organized by Heo. The demonstration was dispersed by force, but Heo managed to avoid capture once again (RGASPI f. 495 op. 228 d. 459, p. 16v; *Maeil sinbo* 1931). In the following months of 1931 and in 1932, in tandem with the general radicalization of the Korean countryside in the wake of the Great Depression of 1929 and the subsequent fall in rice prices (Shin 1996, 95–96), Heo was to lead some of the most militant rural collective actions in the history of 1930s Korea.

In June 1931, Heo, then in hiding, was one of the leaders of his peasant union's anti-landlord struggle.⁷ This time unionized peasants upped the ante by resorting to a very radical method of struggle. They cajoled the landlords into surrendering tenants' debt receipts, and then publicly burned these documents. The action symbolically signified the irreversible cancellation of tenant debts (*Dong-A ilbo* 1934a; *Joseon jungang ilbo* 1934b), Heo's autobiography informs us that the militant peasants managed to destroy 30 debt documents. Their total value was ca 6,000 *yen* (RGASPI, f. 495 d. 228 op. 134, p. 14; RGASPI, f. 495 d. 228 op. 134, p. 13). In fact, Seongjin peasants were not the only ones to use such a militant method of struggle. In Hongwon, yet another Hamgyeongnam-do locality which had a radical peasant union, peasants managed to carry out a similar collective action a couple of months later, on September 1, 1932. Interestingly, some of the participants were radicalized youth from richer rural households who destroyed tenant debt documents stolen from their own parents (*Dong-A ilbo* 1933).

On July 27, 1931, Heo led one more violent struggle.⁸ Approximately one thousand members of his peasant union went to Nongseongdong Hamlet in Hakchung subcounty, part of Seongjin county (located close to the county seat of Seongjin). That village was dominated by a certain Kim Sangcho, a Presbyterian landlord who became simultaneously the target for both anti-landlord and anti-religious campaigns. Since the targeted landlord claimed connections to Joseon dynasty *yangban* gentry, Heo defined the campaign against him as "anti-feudal" (RGASPI, f. 495 d. 228 op. 134, p. 14).

7. For the dating, I follow RGASPI, f. 495 d. 228 op. 134, p. 13.

8. For the dating, I follow RGASPI, f. 495 d. 228 op. 134, p. 13.

The clash with the landlord's hired hands resulted in a number of injured. After the clash, the "center" (*jungang*) of the Seongjin Peasant Union ordered Heo to hide in the mountains, since large-scale physical violence was sure to attract police attention (RGASPI f. 495 op. 228 d. 459, p. 17v). Indeed, the police apprehended more than a hundred participants in the melee by mid-September (*Dong-A ilbo* 1931b). A few of Heo's household members, his younger brother included, were detained as well (RGASPI f. 495 op. 228 d. 459, p. 17v).

Staying mostly in secret hideouts in the mountains, Heo managed to maintain his presence in his native Seongjin until September 1932, being active as the chief of the Seongjin Peasant Union's agitation and propaganda department and as a member of the local committee for reconstructing the then-defunct Korean Communist Party (RGASPI, f. 495 d. 228 op. 134, p. 14). Thus, by that point Heo the youth and peasant militant developed concomitantly into a grassroots communist activist. This continuous radicalization was influenced by Kim Hakkeol (1908-?), a prominent local activist whom Heo considered his immediate leader (RGASPI, f. 495 d. 228 op. 134, p. 13v). Kim and Heo were of the same age, but Kim graduated from a regular primary school, could read Japanese much better than Heo, and lived from 1928 to 1930 in Tokyo as a labor activist and student. Proficiency in Japanese helped him to learn the basics of Marxism; he was responsible for the Seongjin Peasant Union's underground publishing activities and was part of the communist network (Kang and Seong 1996, 145). Kim was arrested in April 1932 together with some other activists, including Heo's own elder brother, who was sentenced to three years in prison (RGASPI f. 495 op. 228 d. 459, p. 19). Their trial—with altogether 75 peasant activists as defendants—took place more than two years later, in October 1934 (*Joseon jungang ilbo* 1934a). By that time, Heo was already in Moscow. He was sure, however, that his mentor had been betrayed to the Japanese police by its Korean spies (RGASPI f. 495 op. 228 d. 459, p. 19). Indeed, the issue of police spies and the methods for punishing them were among the hottest topics for Seongjin peasant radicals in 1932.

While Heo mentions the "struggle against police spies" (RGASPI, f. 495 d. 228 op. 134, p. 13) as one of his major campaigns, his own narrative

suggests that this “struggle” did not significantly overstep legal norms. For example, he reports having observed for a long time a scion of local Confucian scholars (‘feudal element’), a certain Choe Yunmyeong, whose close contacts with local police looked suspicious. In the end, Heo decided to refuse any contact with Choe (*insa danjeol*) but rescinded these sanctions after finding more likely suspects in the case of the supposed betrayal of Kim Hakkeol (RGASPI f. 495 op. 228 d. 459, pp. 18v–19). Typically, these suspects were subjected to collective questioning at a secret meeting of the union members in the mountains. Their refusal to answer questions from the crowd, or insufficiently persuasive answers, could strengthen suspicion and lead to sanctions, mostly in the form of a communal boycott (RGASPI f. 495 op. 228 d. 459, p. 19). However, we know from other sources that suspicions of spying could also provoke illegal and violent sanctions—namely, beating. In July 1931, for example, 13 youth activists from Seongjin were questioned by police for the alleged beating of a former comrade who supposedly took money from the authorities in exchange for information about his fellow activists. That the suspected spy was observed spending money the origin of which he could not explain led his former comrades to assault him (*Dong-A ilbo* 1931a).

Illegal and violent anti-spy actions could sometimes backfire since they gave the authorities abundant opportunities to misrepresent the revolutionaries as simply vicious criminals. One incident of exactly that kind took place in 1932 in Seongjin, gaining sensationalist coverage over the following years. One of the peasant union activists, Heo Cheolbong, was apprehended in mid-September 1931, together with more than a hundred of his comrades. He was, however, released by police suspiciously early. There were strong misgivings that the early release was secured by his doting mother, a certain Madam Kim, who was accused by the union members of leaking union secrets to the police in exchange for her beloved son’s freedom. Ashamed, Heo Cheolbong left his parental house where his two young sisters were known to have been highly critical of their mother’s behavior. Some days later, Madam Kim’s corpse was found in a well. The family and neighbors understood it as most likely suicide, but the police, eager to damage the peasant union’s reputation, indicted Madam Kim’s two

teenage daughters, known for their sympathy to Heo Cheolbong's radicalism, for supposedly having beaten their mother to death. The colonial court found both guilty and sentenced them to 15 and 10 years, respectively (*Dong-A ilbo* 1934b). The case provided an opportunity for the *Maeil sinbo*, mouthpiece of the colonial authorities, to pontificate on "apocalyptic" levels of "immorality" among the radicals, supposedly prepared to sacrifice even their parents to their "ideas" (*Maeil sinbo* 1932a, 1932b).

Im Gyeongseok, who dealt with this tragic episode in a separate article, understands it as, most likely, a police frame-up (Im 2021b). The suicide of a distressed mother who found herself ostracized by her community and family on account of her assumed dealings with Japanese colonial police, was seemingly misrepresented as a case of revolutionary parricide. This was seemingly done in the hope of defaming revolutionary practices in a society still influenced by the Confucian emphasis on filiality. However, that such a frame-up might even be needed exposes the extent to which the revolutionary underground could gain a sort of counter-hegemonic (Gramsci 1971, 57) power over the colonized population by posing as guardians of informal justice norms. Concomitantly, the revolutionaries assumed the role of punishers of the supposed traitors—that is, those community members accused of having trespassed these norms by collaborating with a colonial authority widely seen as illegitimate. It is known that revolutionary 'liquidations' of supposed traitors in situations wherein governments have either lost their legitimacy or never possessed it (the latter was, by and large, the case in colonial Korea—see, for example, Jin-Yeon Kang [2016] on the Japanese colonial government's lack of popular legitimacy) are often important for imbuing revolutionaries with a counter-hegemonic aura of communal justice administrators.⁹ Such 'liquidations' by nationalists or their anarchist allies in Chinese exile in the 1920s often provided a cause for celebration in the nationalist camp (Park 2013). Communists did not disapprove of 'liquidations' in theory, although they are not known to have conducted any successful actions of this kind inside

9. For example, see van Ree (2008) on the case of the 'liquidations' of presumed police spies by Transcaucasian social democrats in the early 20th century.

Korea proper (Im 2004). Not only peasant but also labor and student unions often took anti-spy actions of a less radical kind—for example, organizing special groups dedicated to exposing spies (one such group was detected by police among Daegu students in 1931, see *Jungang ilbo* [1931]). A frame-up of a parricide case might have been needed to defame the peasant revolutionaries and prevent them from assuming a counter-hegemonic role as keepers of norms of communal justice. Heo Seongtaek, however, seemingly did not want to allow the police to prevail in this discursive contest. According to his own autobiography, he supported those apprehended in this case as part of the peasant union's general support of victims of police repression (RGASPI f. 495 op. 228 d. 459, p. 17v).

Overall, we can conclude that the conditions under which the radical peasant movement by Heo Seongtaek and his comrades in Seongjin developed were characterized by an amalgamation of spatial dynamism, mobility, and varied repertoires of resistance. The latter creatively combined technically legal, a-legal, and illegal forms and techniques of struggle. Heo's and his comrades' transborder mobility radius included both legal crossings to, and sojourns in, the colonial metropole (Japan proper), semi-legal crossings over the Chinese border, and illegal crossings to Soviet Russia. The chosen forms of resistance varied, including perfectly legal reading societies, a-legal demonstrations and meetings, and completely illegal coercive and violent methods (forced destruction of debt documents, anti-spy struggles etc.). Both a-legal and especially illegal methods could invite police repression in the form of mass arrests and large-scale trials. However, they were also conducive to solidifying the counter-hegemony of the peasant radicals. Counter-hegemony is understood here in the Gramscian sense of the word, as leadership gained and exercised by subaltern groups in advance of winning governmental power (Gramsci 1971, 57). The role of the dispensers of redistributive (cancellation of peasant debts) and punitive (punishing presumed spies) justice assumed by peasant radicals here comes exactly under the category of counter-hegemony. This counter-hegemony was being exercised by activist groups structured by both horizontal and vertical relationships. The latter were predicated on each activist's seniority inside the movement, achievements, and education level. Heo's education

attainments—reading skills in vernacular Korean and Japanese, knowledge of basic popular Marxist primers—would have entitled him, at best, to a mid-level underground cadre position, despite his leadership in several local struggles in 1930–1933. Studying in Moscow, the acknowledged capital of the ‘red’ world of the 1920–1930s’ communist radicals, was a known shortcut to assuming positions of higher responsibility. That Heo, as we will see below, managed to reach Moscow and come back to Korea after finishing his studies there (1933–1937) attests both to the degree of porousness of colonial Korea’s external borders and the high level of spatial mobility characteristic of the Korean communist milieu of the 1920s and early 1930s.

After 1933—Sojourn in Moscow and Colonial Prison

Heo had to leave his native Seongjin in September 1932 due to the heightened threat of arrest. Before successfully departing for Moscow in September 1933, Heo spent a dangerous year on the move. Despite being a wanted man, he managed to move to Gyeongheung county in his own Hamgyeongbuk-do province, to work at a coalmine. According to his own report, he even participated in the miners’ unionization drive there, thus changing his status to that of a peasant-cum-labor activist (RGASPI, f. 495 d. 228 op. 134, p. 14). Later he went to Unggi (today a part of Rajin), an industrial town where Heo could easily find work as a construction laborer (helping to build a new road). Concomitantly he participated in activities aimed at rebuilding the underground Korean Communist Party (which Comintern had considered defunct since the end of 1928). He later reported that in Party work, his main mentor in Unggi was Hyeon Chunbong (Hyeon Chilchong, 1898–?), yet another Seongjin native who was active in the Korean communist movement in Gando, the border area of northeastern China populated largely by migrant Koreans. Arrested and sentenced in 1928 (see above), he was released by August 1932 and immediately returned to underground work (Lee 1978, 40). Another mentor was Heo Eungcheol, also a former Seongjin inhabitant, now in charge of the Party work in the Hamgyeongbuk-do area. After contact with Heo Eungcheol was lost (Heo

Seongtaek understood him to have been arrested), Heo Seongtaek moved to work with another underground organizer, Kim Pilseon (1901–?) from Najin, who sent him to Moscow for study in September 1933 (RGASPI f. 495 op. 228 d. 459, p. 13). However, contrary to Heo Seongtaek's understanding, Heo Eungcheol was still at large at that time and was only captured by Japanese police by the end of 1934, after he and Hyeon Chunbong had produced and distributed on the streets 12,000 copies of leaflets celebrating the October 1917 Russian socialist revolution (Lee 1978, 40; *Joseon jungang ilbo* 1935). This outline of Heo Seongtaek's activities in the period September 1932–September 1933 testifies to the ability of early 1930s' underground communist cells to move their militants between different Korean localities and across international borders and to develop large-scale illegal work (unionization, leaflet distribution, etc.) despite police surveillance.

In Moscow, Heo Seongtaek—known there under his assumed name, of Kim Irsu (or Ilsu)—quickly acquired the reputation of a model student. Enrolled in the Comintern-run Communist University of Eastern Toilers (KUTV), he was in December 1934 characterized by one of his teachers, Kim Danya (1899–1938), as “a student with a good attitude towards work, socially active, able to connect the content of his studies with his country's life and his own personal experience.” Moreover, Kim further described Heo's almost miraculous progress from the “semi-literate” militant on his arrival to an aspiring member of the communist intelligentsia, “...already able to write shorter articles” on the basis of Marxism-Leninism, news from Korea and his own experiences (RGASPI, f. 495 op. 228 d. 134, p. 009). Kim's assessment of Heo, dated June 1935, mentions that Heo was elected the leader of the Korean students' group, that—despite all the training in writing he underwent—he spoke better than he wrote, that he was prepared to run Communist Party work independently on his own (with agitation and propaganda being his forte), and that he was capable of taking responsibility for the work on a county level once back in Korea (RGASPI, f. 495 op. 228 d. 134, p. 10). A new assessment, undertaken by Kim in July 1936, found Heo a highly organized individual working on a book (presumably on colonial Korean conditions) with ample use of Korean press sources (RGASPI, f. 495

op. 228 d. 134, p. 008). While Comintern was being increasingly Stalinized throughout the 1930s (LaPorte et al. 2008), KUTV still remained a place where militants from a number of countries could reflect on their revolutionary experiences, contextualize these experiences inside the theoretical perspective which they were taught to apply, and engage in practice-oriented research work on their native societies.¹⁰ Obviously, Heo amply availed himself of these opportunities and broadened his horizons, consolidating a theoretical basis for his militant work and concurrently earning the prestige which were to move him upwards in the hierarchy of underground communist cadres after the termination of his studies.

A signal that Kim Irsu/Heo Seongtaek was rising rapidly in the ranks was the fact that a modest student from Korea was selected to participate in the Seventh Congress of Comintern (July 25–August 20, 1935), theoretically the highest decision-making body of the self-proclaimed world revolution headquarters. This congress is best known for declaring the all-important shift to the united front strategies, necessitated by the Soviet Union's new diplomatic course of containing the growing danger of fascist Germany via alliances with Europe's remaining democracies on Germany's borders (Carr 1982, 147–152). Japan's seizure of Manchuria and its militarization of both Manchuria (under the puppet Manchukuo regime) and the northern parts of Korea (Heo's homeland) was no less a danger for the Soviet Union's exposed Far East (Kotkin 2017, 88–90). No wonder then that it was *this* danger that Kim Irsu/Heo Seongtaek, as a representative of Korean communists, was asked to speak about. He duly obliged, detailing—with a few exaggerations—the atmosphere of police repression and militarization in Korea after his departure from there in 1933. Further, he posed—apparently as he was “asked” to by his superiors—the task of building an anti-imperialist anti-war front for Korea's communist underground. He justified a tactical alliance with the “Korean national bourgeoisie” by the presumed “contradictions” between Korea's bourgeois class and its dominant Japanese partners (who, according to Kim/Heo's speech, monopolized most

10. See for example, McClellan (1993) on the African and Black American experiences in the KUTV system and Kirasirova (2017) on KUTV's students from Arab countries.

of the profits in Manchuria). However, it would be wrong to assume that his speech was simply the work of his Comintern handlers. The criticisms of the “Korean reformist bourgeoisie” and its original pro-imperialist stance were, in fact, not necessarily in tune with Comintern’s new orthodoxy of cross-class collaboration. These criticisms might have emerged from Kim/Heo’s own bitter experiences as an uncompromising militant in early 1930s northern Korea (Kim/Heo’s speech is reprinted in Wada and Shirinya [2007, 691–699]).

In the subsequent fateful years of 1936, and especially 1937, Comintern was engulfed by the Stalinist Great Purges. Its Korean section was among the major victims (Son 2017). Kim Danya, Heo’s mentor, was arrested on December 2, 1937, and subsequently executed for “pro-Japanese espionage.” However, he was jobless for more than a year prior to his arrest, as “unreliable” Korean revolutionary exiles were being excluded from Comintern’s daily work.¹¹ Nevertheless, the witch-hunt against the Korean revolutionaries of the older generation did not affect Heo. As a relative novice in revolutionary work with no record of ever assuming central positions in the movement, or of studying in Japan or China, Heo was apparently seen as a useful grassroots organizer rather than a political threat.

In March 1937, his supervisors asked the representatives of the secret police at KUTV to allow his infiltration into Japanese-controlled Korea for underground work (RGASPI, f. 495 op. 228 d. 134, p. 002). Heo graduated in May 1936, and it was suggested already back then that he should be dispatched back to Korea (RGASPI f. 495 op. 228 d. 459, p. 28), but obviously the Great Purges disorganized Comintern’s work and delayed decision-making on politically sensitive issues (and the infiltration of a trained militant into a target area was one such issue). It is commonly assumed that Heo was transported across the (now much less porous) Soviet-Korean border and smuggled back into his native Hamgyeong-do province at some point soon after March 1937 (Im 2021a). However, police surveillance was tighter under the wartime regime in 1937 compared with

11. The documents from his police investigation file are published in Ku-Degai and Kang (2009, 88–161).

the older days of colonial Korea anno 1933 when Heo departed for the Soviet Union. The newly infiltrated militant was quickly apprehended and sentenced to four years in prison on May 24, 1938. His prison surveillance card also contains the official reason for sentencing: Heo was found guilty of destroying debt receipts back in 1931 and using violence in the process (NIKH ia 5991 card no. SJ0000008280). The illegal methods Heo liberally employed during the heydays of the radical struggles in the early 1930s came back to haunt him. Whether the Japanese authorities knew about Heo's Moscow sojourn is uncertain. However, they apparently had little doubt that Heo was one of the leading Communist militants of Hamgyeong-do province. Thus, despite his four-year sentence, he was kept in prison until the very day of Korea's liberation in August 1945 (Im 2021a).

The Post-1945 Career of Heo Seongtaek: Some Continuities

Heo's post-1945 activities are not to be covered in detail here; this merits a separate article. It must be mentioned, however, that the legacy of the 1930s militancy left its traces on Heo's post-1945 activities. The activity Heo is best remembered for is his leadership in Jeonpyeong, the radical union confederation which provided much grassroots support to South Korea's communists during the post-liberation years. For example, as research on Jeonpyeong's Daegu branch demonstrates, most of its local activists were, like Heo, experienced leftist labor militants with their careers in the movement going back to the 1930s or even earlier (I. Yi 1990). Heo and other veterans of the 1930s movement inside Jeonpyeong saw the development of union members' "consciousness" (*uisik*), via propaganda, study, and experience of collective action, as one of the paramount duties of union activists (Hong 2010). Shouldering, as Jeonpyeong's leader, the overall responsibility for this consciousness-raising work, Heo, in a way, was building on his early 1930s experiences as the chief of the Seongjin Peasant Union's agitation and propaganda department. In yet another way, Heo was continuing along the lines of his activities in the 1930s. Just as back then, when he had combined his grassroots peasant and labor activism with work

on rebuilding the underground Korean Communist Party under the aegis of Comintern, Jeonpyeong was a union confederation under de facto communist leadership. Akin to Comintern in the 1930s, the Soviet military administration in North Korea was providing political guidance and a strategic framework for Jeonpyeong's activities (Yoon 2012, 15–20). As the Cold War was intensifying in Korea, the US military administration's crackdown against such an organization was inevitable, leading to Heo's imprisonment and subsequent flight to North Korea.

It also must be mentioned, that, as a high-level official in North Korea after 1948, Heo was one of several former grassroots militants eventually integrated into the mechanism of party-state bureaucracy. While Heo was appointed as the first minister of labor (1948–1949), the first minister of commerce was Jang Siu (1891–1953), known as a major organizer of the peasant movement among Koreans in Manchuria and later as one of the leaders of the Korean Communist Party's Manchuria branch (Seo 2005, 226; Kang and Seong 1996, 413). Moreover, the first minister of transport was Ju Yeongha, a former militant known for his role in organizing the leftist union at the giant Hamheung plant of Noguchi's Japan Nitrogen Fertilizer Company (Kang and Seong 1996, 470). Finally, the first minister of justice, Yi Seungyeop (1905–1954), was originally a labor movement figure from the Incheon area (T. Pak 1995, 103). To be sure, the majority of North Korea's first cabinet members were either former participants in anti-Japanese armed struggle in China (Kim Il-sung, Kim Chaek, Choe Yonggeon, Kim Wonbong, Pak Iru, Choe Changik, Heo Jeongsuk, etc.) or leftist intellectuals (writer Hong Myeonghui, economist Pak Mungyu, historian Baek Namun, linguist Yi Geungno). However, at least some of them had authentic grassroots worker or peasant movement experience.

Still, while *all* the prominent intellectuals included in North Korea's first government (Hong Myeonghui, Pak Mungyu, Baek Namun, Yi Geungno) and some of their colleagues with anti-Japanese armed struggle experience (Heo Jeongsuk, etc.) survived the Party purges of the mid- and late 1950s and later, practically *all* the members of North Korea's first cabinet with a grassroots activist background did not fare well. Heo Seongtaek, Ju Yeongha, Jang Siu, and Yi Seungyeop *all* disappeared from the political scene in the

whirlwind of the 1950s purges (Seo 2005, 446, 788). Obviously, the habits and mindset peculiar to the former underground militants failed to prepare the radicals-turned-ministers for the intricacies of the world of bureaucratic obedience, maneuvering, and intrigue. Heo, for example, was accused in 1950 by Kim Il-sung of failing, in his capacity as a Central Committee member of the Democratic Front for the Reunification of Korea (an umbrella organization for pro-North Korean parties and groups, founded in 1946), to lead the guerrilla movement in South Korea in the spirit of Party directives (I. Kim 1954, 132; also J. Yi 1997, 242). The failure—if it indeed took place—might not have been accidental, since Heo, despite his record of peasant and labor militancy, had no prior experience in supervising guerrilla operations. In addition, Ju, Jang, and Yi were all implicated and purged as early as 1953 due to their connections with the domestic faction of Korean communists and its leader, Pak Heonyeong (1900–1956), Kim Il-sung’s major rival (Seo 2005, 436–447). Unlike them, Heo had no connection whatsoever with Pak throughout his turbulent life of pre-1945 activism. When Heo came to Moscow in September 1933, Pak—who had been staying in Moscow since 1928 as a student at Comintern’s International Lenin School—had already left earlier that same year for underground work in Shanghai, where he was soon apprehended by the Japanese consular police (Kang and Seong 1996, 217). Apparently, thanks to the absence of any connections to Pak, Heo was spared until the very end of the 1950s. However, in the end his fate too was sealed.

In Lieu of a Conclusion

Heo Seongtaek’s activities in the 1920s–early 1930s, known to us via Heo’s Comintern dossier and colonial-age press reports, allow us to reconstruct both the conditions and repertoire of the struggles in which the grassroots militants of the type Heo embodied were engaged. As we can see, an important condition of grassroots radicalism in colonial Korea’s borderlands was the relative porousness of its borders and the high degree of spatial mobility characteristic of the peripheral militants of the colonial era. Yet

another important axis along which mobility was possible was the social one. In the hierarchies of the underground militancy, one's rank was determined by both revolutionary credentials and educational level. More generally, 'enlightenment' in the form of learning eventually conducive to socialist consciousness-raising was seen as one of the crucial areas of radical struggle. In that context, it is highly symbolic that Heo's radical activities in the 1920–1930s, before his imprisonment in 1938, began with a self-help 'enlightenment' group in the late 1920s and culminated in his study in Moscow from 1933 to 1937. The radicals needed the cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986) that learning could endow them with in order to rise in the ranks on a personal level. However, they concurrently also saw learning as the way toward a general empowerment of their constituency (poorer peasants and later workers, in Heo's case). This tendency towards prioritizing consciousness-raising work continued in Heo's 1945–1947 activities as the central labor leader in South Korea.

Aside from technically legal 'enlightenment' work, Heo was engaged in a-legal (large-scale, often violent demonstrations) and illegal struggles. The latter could encompass a number of methods, from forcible seizure and destruction of peasant debt obligations to anti-spy struggles, which, as we know, could also take on violent dimensions. It is important to remember, however, that radicalization of the struggle—against the backdrop of the socio-economic crisis in the wake of the Great Depression—and employment of non-legal (a-legal and illegal) forms of confrontation vis-à-vis local elites and the authorities could be conducive to the acquisition of counter-hegemony (Gramsci 1971, 57) by peasant activists. They were typically seen, at least inside their original constituency (primarily, poorer peasants), as administrators of communal justice and defenders of the common good. This explains both the relatively large size of the radical peasant unions of the kind Heo's represented (eleven local chapters, approximately a hundred active militants, and several thousand peasants involved; *Joseon jungang ilbo* 1934a) and the ability of such local militants as Heo to avoid capture by the Japanese police for years. Finding informers willing to betray an activist in hiding could be complicated in a milieu where informers were stigmatized and activists respected. The militants of Heo's

type, commanding tangible authority among the grassroots inhabitants of their native localities, were integral in the establishment of the North Korean regime. However, as we saw above, most of them, badly suited to party-state's bureaucratic routines and suspected of connections to Kim Il-sung's political rivals, were to disappear from the top ranks of the political scene as Kim Il-sung consolidated his paramount position throughout the 1950s.

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