

**Ruth Barraclough, “Red Love in Korea:
Rethinking Communism, Feminism and
Sexuality” in *Red Love Across the
Pacific: Political and Sexual Revolutions
of the Twentieth Century***

Robert Winstanley–Chesters*
Australian National University

“I have no eyes now, yet I can still see the revolution” (Ch’oi Hŭi-suk, quoted in Chosŏn Yŏsŏng 1986, 25)

Ch’oi Hŭi-suk’s plaintive and impassioned final words recounted by North Korea’s journal Chosŏn Yŏsŏng (“Women of Korea”), before she was killed by Japanese Army doctors is perhaps a perfect distillation of contemporary or recent North Korean notions of how a perfect female revolutionary should behave. Ch’oi Hŭi-suk, along with her fellow female companions and fighters in the 1920s and 1930s such as Pak Rok’ Gum and Kim Hwak-shil and their leader and mentor (at least in North Korea’s historiography), and eventual wife of Kim Il-sŏng were ‘crackshots’, experts in the brutal killing of those that they sought to contest, as well as generally experts in the act of dying. These women’s passions and energies are for the most part in their sparse biographies and the fragments of their lives recorded within articles in Chosŏn Yŏsŏng and elsewhere, directed in moments of conflict and at the moment of their death. A number of their bodies are used

* Robert.Winstanley-Chesters@anu.edu.au

as weapons or explosive objects, their own violent annihilation serving to negate in some small way elements of Japanese colonial power. These narratives of self-immolation and destruction make it difficult to think beyond the cultural frame they provide, make it difficult to think of these women at other moments of their lives, perhaps even make it difficult for us to think of North Korean women or women connected to North Korean history in other terms. Even that most central of North Korean historical female figures, Kim Chŏng-suk in the historiography of Pyongyang is predominantly a figure of intense self-sacrifice who determinedly suppressed her emotions in favour of revolutionary politics, who sought to ignore both her desires and pain to support her General (Biography of Kim Chŏng-suk, 2002). Even though Kim Chŏng-suk would ultimately be something of a revolutionary immortal (in a grand and historic Korean cultural tradition), she was never beyond completing the repairs of her male counterparts uniforms, cooking food for an entire camp (having spent the entire day marching and fighting Japanese forces), or enduring brutal and intimate tortures. Even Kim Chŏng-suk's most important role to North Korean history, as partner to Kim Il-sŏng and mother of Kim Chŏng-il is extracted of any passion and carnal energy, to the point that her biography deliberately and artfully skips over the consummation of her most important relationship.

These are the women who interestingly through their pains and tendencies to not physically survive the processes which would produce the politics and nationalism of North Korea, actually conceptually survive not only their moments of combat and the difficulties of the nation's Liberation, early development and the tumult of the Korean War (and its political aftermaths), but, even if some are obscure, still live in Pyongyang's political mind today. Ruth Barraclough in the fascinating book chapter and journal article reviewed here recounts the story of a group of women who unlike these vital, energetic characters of North Korean mythology and mythography are very much deceased, remembered only briefly and partially occasionally by countervailing histories, whose narratives are reconstructable in our present at best in fragments and echoes. Perhaps the best way of introducing the possibility of the fascinating female lives Barraclough uncovers is to remember another recent work in which seemingly equally

impossible journeys are recounted. Sho Konishi In ‘Anarchist Modernity: Cooperatism and Japanese-Russian Intellectual Relations in Modern Japan’ (Konishi 2013), explodes a myth of pre-post-modern hypermobility. Within the pages of Konishi’s work, Mikhail Bakunin (legendary Russian theoriser and practitioner of militant anarchism), escapes his incarceration in Siberia to discover the tumultuous and chaotic possibilities offered by the Meiji revolution and friends in Yokohama, before setting sail for mid-19th century San Francisco and another anarchist safe house before finally travelling across a United States still in formation and across the Atlantic to Europe. Inspired by Bakunin’s revelation of an Asian nation (Japan) in energetic reconfiguration, Lev Mechnikov (younger brother of Ilya Mechnikov father of modern gut biology and pro-biotics), travelled to and lived in Yokohama to it seems consider the nature of Japan’s revolutionary political moment, and to set up (as a sociologist and linguist), the precursor to the current Tokyo University of Foreign Studies (itself eventually partly responsible for producing a burst of Tolstoyan religious commitment in Japan) (Konishi, 2013). At an impossibly difficult moment in political history, and well before technologies such as air travel or intercontinental train travel (the Trans-Siberian only reached Vladivostok in 1916) compressed time and space these unconventional political activists and theorised traversed the globe, human transformative vectors for both their own politics and the political cultures which encountered them. Barraclough’s women make similarly extraordinary journeys, bridge previously insurmountable bounds, develop new cultural and social forms of relation, the type of which would not be seen before.

Just as Mechnikov in the terrain revealed by Konishi would make transformative connections with Japanese activists through the explosive and iconoclastic work of Leo Tolstoy, so those enmeshed within Barraclough’s would find direction and inspiration from that of Alexandra Kollontai. Kollontai, at one point the only woman in Lenin’s first cabinet in 1923 produced a novel called ‘*Vasilisa Malygina*.’ According to the introduction to the monograph in which Barraclough’s ‘*Red Love in Korea...*’ sits, within five years the newly retitled ‘*Red Love*’ had been translated from Russian into Japanese, then Korean, then Chinese and then in 1932 into English (using the more heated title ‘*Free Love*’). Kollontai’s story of the impact

principles of Bolshevik common holding and cooperation would have on personal, sexual, familial and social relationships and the exploding of both monogamy, patriarchy and the notion of the nuclear family had a seemingly dramatic impact on political subcultures across both North America and the Asia-Pacific region. Barraclough and her fellow editors Heather Bowen-Struyk and Paula Rabinovitz trace the waves of sexual and social energy and reconfiguration throughout the political movements of the period, though mostly as I have already said from the faintest echoes of this buried, repressed and forgotten politics.

'*Red Love*'s translation in 1928 into Korean generated a wave of '*Pulkain Yōnae*' which was essentially extraordinary to Korean colonial society of the time. Those familiar with social and cultural norms of the later Yi dynasty and its intersection with Japanese colonial times would of course be aware that what might be now termed sexually liberation relationships and social organisation and an overturning of gender hierarchy would have been utterly shocking to both ancient Korean culture and new forms of Imperial Japanese or colonial subjectivity. However this in a sense was a time for shocking and to be shocked. Korean's had been enormously challenged by cultural elements brought by those who sought to dominate its politics and reconfigure its culture, the famous Queen Min for example is recounted as having been so thoroughly disturbed by the prospect of women engaging in physical activity (namely a game of Tennis), that she refused to continue watching or to return to the part of town in which it had taken place ever again (Gwang Ok, 2007). While many were disgusted, depressed or severely disorientated, others were of course enormously excited. Just as the new is shocking (in the way cultural commentator Robert Hughes would have it), it is also extremely attractive and enticing. While some of course would find new linguistic forms and the domination of Japanese over the Korean language during the colonial period, some politically minded writers found the abandonment of Korean as liberating and the vector through which their writings would find new audiences, freed from the historical shackles of Chosŏn. Equally at the edges of the Japanese Empire, Koreans and those close to them would find cultural liberation in the Japanese vassal state of Manchukuo, rumours abounding of Jazz clubs in Hsinking (Changchung) and Harbin and mythic visits by Josephine Baker

(who did it seems actually visit Japan in 1954 (Ara, 2012)). The collapse and eradication of historical forms of Korean social and cultural organisation of course left a great deal of space for those who were not disturbed in a negative way by dramatic changes in social relation, but in fact those for whom such change was imperative and necessary.

Barracrough's opening sentence "In the 1920s and 1930s, some of Korea's most famous Communists were young women" (Barracrough, 2015, 23), seems of course impossible and incongruous in the South Korea of today. Being a famous Communist in Seoul, Daegu or Busan is certainly not an ideal occupation for anyone. However in the 1920s and 1930s across the globe being a Communist, a Socialist or a follower of Trotsky was of course in some sense to be modern. Music, film, culture and social organisation were all being deeply impacted and creatively empowered by the politics of the left, unhooked and unleashed by the victory of Russia's 1917 Revolution, the end of the First World War, the collapse of old certainties and the forging of new possibilities. With the benefit of long hindsight of course we in 2016 or 2017 might see this as a brief moment of flux before another brutal global conflagration, the rise of Japanese Militarism and the disappointments of Stalinism and the later Soviet Union. It did not look or feel like this obviously in 1928, Marxist principles and materialistic dialectics breaking so many bounds and restrictions as to make anything seemingly possible, even female *'Pulkŏm Yŏnae.'*

These fascinating women such as Hŏ Jŏng-suk, Vera Kang, Kang Kyong-ae and Chong Ch'il-song that Barracrough describes would dramatically break the moulds which once bound Korean culture. Some of course would themselves be broken by those new moulds which grew around them and imposed new social bounding under Communism both in the Soviet Union and in an early North Korea. In a sense these stories may be familiar to readers of Janet Poole's recent work on the first generation of North Korean literary figures, *'When the Future Disappears: The Modernist Imagination in Late Colonial Korea.'* Poole outlines the similarly ground breaking lives of characters such as Im Hwa, Pak T'aweon, So Insik and Choe Myongik, writers who found the allure of the bright possibilities of a field of cultural and political production freed of the strictures of Capital, Empire and

the past incredibly tempting (Poole, 2014). However none of these writers appear to survive the disruptive period of the Korean War and the political period following it during which Kim Il-sŏng and his followers purge North Korean politics of factional difference. As excited as these writers might have been by a future of internationalist, futurist Communist utopia, they would never really see it and their writings would scarcely/barely escape the vortex of political correction and cleansing to become known in our present. As bright as these figures of early North Korean literary production might have sought to shine, their histories are dark, shadowy and traceable only by their ruins...a characterisation we might bequeath Barraclough's most famous Communist young women.

Once part of a powerful network of activist and theorist interaction and exchange, the women Barraclough encounters make extraordinary connections and then are separated equally dramatically by politics, time and fate. Vera Khan and Hŏ Jŏng-suk for instance met in Shanghai, Jŏng-suk recruiting Khan into the Communist movement and forming the Society of Comrades in 1925 (Barraclough, 2015, 26). This first socialist feminist organisation engaged in activating the political minds of working women, just as Vera Khan had done in the early 1920s in the giant industrial enterprises of Chem'ulpo (Inch'ŏn). Novels, newspapers, interviews both Hŏ Jŏng-suk and Vera Khan would become what Barraclough recounts were considered 'beautiful socialists' (Barraclough, 2015, 29), both would become equally famous for their relationships which exploded convention, as much as they were ultimately tragic (Hŏ Jŏng-suk engaging in a new love affair, while her current partner was in prison for political insurrection, Vera Khan finding a new husband when Pak Hon-yong, who she had married in Seoul in 1924 before moving to the Soviet Union was arrested and presumed killed by the Japanese (Barraclough, 2015, 28). This new husband, Kim Danya was executed in the Soviet Union in 1938). Vera Khan's period as one of these 'beautiful socialists' would not last until Korea's Liberation, and she found herself in 1938 expelled like so much of the Korean population of the Soviet Union and eventually sentenced to five years in a prison camp in what is now Kazakhstan. Hŏ Jŏng-suk survived to become the first and founding head of the Democratic Women's League (as which she secured the passage of Gender Equality legislation into North Korea's

constitution), North Korea's Minister of Culture and finally between 1957 and 1959 its Minister of Justice (Barraclough, 2015, 28). Barraclough delves even further into the complicated processes through which Hō Jōng-suk's rose to prominence and temporarily maintained her position in the complimentary article for the History Workshop (Barraclough, 2014). Eventually the post Korean War purges and cleansing of North Korean politics caught up with her and she was forced to implicate her own former husband in counter-revolutionary plotting.

Barraclough along with more esoteric and liminal characters such as the former *kisaeng* (royal courtesan), Chong Ch'il-song and still renowned writer and once member of the Kununhoe feminist movement, Kang Kyong-ae, presents Hō Jōng-suk and Vera Khan within a rich web of actors in a burst of enthusiasm, commitment and experimentation for the practices and principles of Red Love. Barraclough also grounds these stories, experiences and life fragments within the inevitable and inescapable context of what she terms 'Cold War Gender Politics' (Barraclough, 2015, 33). While many of the most beautiful and most committed amongst these women would not even survive to see something being called the Cold War being born, nor certainly to see either its death or continuation on the Korean Peninsula their energy and love (and lovers) were almost invariably caught up in the practices, processes and structures of the Cold War. The potential these women saw for personal and gender liberation and transformation through the lens and power of Communism and Materialist dialectics for the most part would be dashed by the reality of autocratic state formation, the misery of Stalinism and the rise to power of a disinterested Kim Il-sōng clique. Just as North Korea's literary leading lights encountered by Janet Poole, Barraclough's 'beautiful socialists' would never see their dreams and desires fully realised, the bounds of gender and patriarchy fully broken. Their personal futures were often to be messy, painful, disappointing and desperate of course, however perhaps the most astute and interesting elements of Barraclough's powerful work has been the citing of some of that messiness and disappointment in the reflexivity of memory. Through the fractures and shards of these women's lives that she is able to recover and reconstruct, Barraclough also uncovers streams of memory focused on them which are interesting in their distinction and differences between each other. Hō Jōng-suk

is apparently seen as an object lesson in the dangers of Communist enthusiasm, while Kang Kyong-ae, like some of Janet Poole's writers, is still remembered and revered in South Korea, a talented, insightful yet difficult voice from the past. Vera Khan's memory, it seems following her rehabilitation in 1989 by a dying Soviet Union was even accorded the honour of a posthumous Medal of Patriotic Honour in 2007 for her work with Koreans in the Russian Far East (Barraclough, 2015, 29). In these differences are of course the cracks of memory, opened up by the political processes of both remembering and forgetting, processes common to many of those who were touched by the reality of North Korea's revolution and the powerful politics of Liberation (in all its forms), during the first half of the 20th century. Ruth Barraclough in this fine work of literary and biographic archaeology allows us a real glimpse into these cracks, the energy of Red Love and its adherents still visible in between.

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