

1932, a Pseudo-Revolutionary Poem

Alzo David-West

Waging a prologue of class war,
The year is nineteen thirty two.
And we do not apologize
If we inconvenience you,
By polishing our guns
And waging this war
For the blood on the soil—
For our children whom you slew!

In less than a minute,
We empower our ranks;
Our fighters document you
With their dazzling bayonets.
You advance and we retreat,
But in your halt or camp,
We shatter your dreams—
In the hail of our gunfire bath!

Oh, the fingers of bullets
Cannot turn ocean tides.
But realize, for the people,
These are never
Dismissed battles;
Recall An Jung Gun¹
When our rifles sing hoorays,
You, dragging limp splintered coattails,—
Now under our indignant boots!

Once we were trampled
Now we arise,
Yet, disguised like ladybugs
In common peasants' eyes.
Look at us defying reckless May thirties,²
And see how our children play and sing.

¹ An Chung-gŭn (1879–1910), a Korean nationalist who assassinated Itō Hirobumi, Japanese resident-general of Korea, in Harbin, Manchuria in 1909.

² The May 30 Uprising (1930) was a premature armed revolt led by a branch of the Chinese Communist Party in Jiandao, Manchuria, resulting in harsh repression and reprisals by the Imperial Japanese colonial government.

When pursued we evaporate—
To where the peaks wear white hats!

In our rest, we consult the commander
Who with us always appears
As a fearless lamppost's beam.
How overjoyed, our fighters stand—
Now Korean steel we become!³

We laugh and cry
When you sputter dumb words,
Chopped words and half words
Like cold lisps of snow.
“Waging a prologue of class war,”—
Can you not understand us?

Softly, we caress the cheekbones of
Our comrades who descend
With petals into brooks and springs.
Then, we regroup—
And continue our fight!

Author's Postscript, 2015

“1932, a Pseudo-Revolutionary Poem” is a free-verse poem I composed more or less spontaneously in spring 2003 as an academic experiment in didactic poetry. At the time, I was researching North Korean Stalinist literary doctrine and literature in translation for my master's thesis in English (multicultural literature) at East Carolina University in the United States, and the poem was conceived as a mock commemoration of the national-Stalinist leader Kim Il Sung (1912–1994) and his postcolonial heroic legend.

The original title was simply “1932” and signifies when Kim reportedly founded the Anti-Japanese Guerrilla Army in the Korean national-liberation struggle in Japanese-occupied Manchuria. Although the details are obscured or omitted in official North Korean hagiography, Kim historically fought as a member and under the auspices of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in the war of resistance against Imperial Japan (1931–1945).

Since I could not aesthetically (sensorily-emotionally-cognitively) bring myself to write a pure panegyric about Kim, I decided to focus on his partisans (we, ranks, fighters, comrades), use allusion (nineteen thirty two), mention him only once by military title (commander), and represent the harassment tactics of a small armed group in irregular warfare. One North Korean source I consulted while writing was Kim's purported autobiography *With the Century*

³ Steel mills were built in colonial-era northern Korea and southern Manchuria, for example, Mitsubishi Steel Mill in Kyōmip'o (1918) and Shōwa Steel Mill in Anshan (1929). I did not know about these two mills when I wrote the poem, and the contrastive association is accidental.

(1992–1995). I also had the heroic-epic novel *The Year 1932* (1972) in mind, but I had not then read it.

Story-wise, the poem is about a Korean guerrilla band, with some peasant support, that wages hit-and-run attacks against an unnamed but contextually self-evident brutal Japanese occupying force. The fighters are evasive, merciless, and relentless, for even though they suffer casualties, the survivors among them continue to be driven by militant patriotism, moral outrage, an emboldening officer, and a terrible joy in killing their enemy oppressor.

All of that interplays with political-historical references (An Jung Gun, May thirties), geographic markers (peaks), and populist imagery (we, blood, soil, children, people, peasants), which are united with simile (disguised like, appears as, words like), mixed metaphor (hail of our gunfire bath), unmixed metaphor (ocean tides, white hats), hyperbole (in less than a minute), caricature (limp splintered coattails), and anthropomorphism (fingers of bullets, rifles sing hoorays, indignant boots, peaks wear white hats, fearless lamppost, cold lips of snow). Anachronism (Korean steel) is invoked in an emotional mental association to North Korean heavy industry after the Korean War (1950–1953), which is permissible since “1932” is not, nor was it intended as, a strictly historical poem.

The tone is irreverent, proud, retributive, and zealous, owing something to Vladimir Mayakovsky, who had an impact in North Korean literary history and whose “You!” (1915) and “My Soviet Passport” (1929) I had encountered about four years earlier. My use of interjections and exclamation marks are Mayakovskyan adaptations, while the couplets with long dashes come from Langston Hughes’ “Ballads of Lenin” (1933). The poetic voice is supposed to be a loud youthful individual speaking on behalf of the group. While in my mind the voice was initially male, gender is actually formally unidentifiable, and the poetic narrator can be imagined as either a man or a woman. Structurally, there are 7 stanzas, 49 lines (8, 8, 9, 8, 5, 6, 5), and 239 words, all with an unconscious metrical, symbolic, and quantitative significance.

Tense, sing-songy, and jerky crescendos of bravado and mockery rise and fall from stanza to stanza, abruptly ebb away with a question, and finally flow into a moment of gentle mourning, which explodes once again with bold energy. Superficially, the immediate effect is glorifying and romanticizing of Korean ethnic nationalism and anticolonial guerrilla war.

Concealed in plain sight, however, are three counterpositions to the official heroic legend: “a prologue of class war”; “the fingers of bullets / Cannot turn ocean tides”; and “Our comrades who descend / With petals into brooks and springs.” What these words imply is that guerrillaism is not a form of workers’ struggle; guerrillaism is ineffective against imperialism; and guerrillaism is a suicidal dead-end strategy.

They are not my personal views. Classical international-Marxism, unlike Chinese and North Korean national-Stalinisms, does not programmatically advocate armed struggle for the overthrow of world capitalism and for the socialist liberation of the oppressed classes. Two works I had read before writing “1932”—Dae-Sook Suh’s *Kim Il Sung* (1988) and Bill Vann’s “Castroism and the Politics of Petty-Bourgeois Nationalism” (1998)—had revealed to me that the Imperial Japanese Army defeated Kim and his CCP-affiliated partisans in 1940 and that the conception of armed struggle and guerrilla warfare is a nationalist mythology of the radicalized

middle class.⁴ I wanted to express those facts as allegories. Afterwards, my interests moved on, and I put the poem away.

Revisiting “1932” twelve years later, I am more aware of how the poem functions as verse, and I still regard it as an interesting academic experiment in precisely what it is, namely, ironic agitprop. That said, I would prefer not to write a didactic poem like this again, though. Artistically, it limits itself with too much ideology, political polemics, and tendentiousness, demanding partisanship from the reader and provoking the reader in a direction that is at the expense of the allegories. All the same, within the genre conventions of an ideological political art, it is my view that “1932” is an illustrative example of the craft of pseudo-revolutionary poetry.

A Comment on “1932” by Emily Won

The following comment on the poem “1932” was solicited from Emily Won (pseudonym), a resident Korean in Japan and a graduate of North Korean-affiliated overseas schools. Ms. Won was not at first informed of the author or origin of the poem and had assumed it was a North Korean work in English translation. Her comment is divided into two parts. The first part addresses some of the historical and emotional evocations of the poem, and the second part reappraises the poem after disclosure of the author, notes, postscript, and subtitle.

Part 1

The title of the poem “1932” attracted my attention since 1932 was one of the darkest years for the Korean people under Japanese colonial rule in 1910 to 1945. I wanted to know how and what Koreans thought at the time, and while reading the poem, it was really difficult for me to suppress my anger over what Japan did in the past.

Between 1895 to 1945, Japan was an empire with extreme ambitions to colonize foreign countries. Under colonialism, many underprivileged people suffered, lost their lives, and lived like slaves. There was no well-organized military force in Korea to fight Japanese imperialism. However, there were some guerrilla movements occurring separately nationwide. Kim Il Sung, who was born in 1912, started his own stream of the Korean anti-Japanese movement in 1932. At the same time, the Chinese people were struggling against Japan.

Under these conditions, there were young radicalized Koreans who desired leadership and a national revolution, and they became partisans. Uneducated, furious young people, who had nothing, could do anything for what they believed in and even sacrifice their lives.

⁴ See also Chong-Sik Lee, *Counterinsurgency in Manchuria: The Japanese Experience, 1931–1940* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 1967); Chong-Sik Lee, *Revolutionary Struggle in Manchuria: Chinese Communism and Soviet Interest, 1922–1945* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1983); V. I. Lenin, “Guerrilla Warfare,” Marxists Internet Archive, 2000, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1906/gw> (accessed March 10, 2015); and Leon Trotsky, “Peasant War in China and the Proletariat,” Marxists Internet Archive, 2003, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1932/09/china.htm> (accessed March 10, 2015).

The tone of the poem is really furious because of the cruelties Japan inflicted on the Korean people. The speaker desires to fight the Japanese and devote himself/herself to the independence of Korea. His/her willingness to kill the Japanese imperialists is intense, and there are many violent words, such as “we polish our guns” and “in the hail of our gunfire bath.”

The poem also mentions An Jung Gun, a Korean national hero whose actions led to the Korean independence movement when he shot Ito Hirobumi, governor-general of Korea, in 1909. Korea had become a protectorate of Japan in 1906. The speaker’s hope for a free Korea is connected to the belief that An’s act of assassination was the right thing to do.

“1932” is very visceral, with vivid illustrations and aggressive and emotional declarations to arouse the attention of Koreans sympathetic to the struggle against colonialism. Anger is the driving force to exterminate the enemy and so is belief in military action to liberate the Korean people from oppression. The mood and tone of the poem reflect rage and grief.

As the speaker makes a show of the absurdity of colonial domination and calls for justice, he/she does not appeal to persuasion by reason or use logical justification. Maybe the author had no such intention and simply wrote to capture a sentiment of the time.

Overall, “1932” is a great poem to understand what some young Korean radicals in the colonial era wanted to do and achieve. The poem contains a message for Koreans to join the partisan movement, and some people in the 1930s did think that without taking collective military action against Japanese imperialism, their lives would not be better.

Part 2

I was surprised to learn the author of the poem “1932” was not from North Korea, or someone who had lived in the past, because the literary style is very similar to the poems I studied in the 1980s and 1990s at North Korean schools in Japan. As a student, I was exposed to many textbook poems and stories, which met the requirements of the North Korean authorities, to educate overseas Koreans in line with North Korean government policy.

According to the author, he wrote “1932” as an “academic experiment” when he was studying North Korean literature in graduate school in the United States in 2003. The notes and postscript convince me that he seriously studied what available literature he had access to, and the result of his effort is a really North-Korean-like poem, which uses common techniques found in North Korean literature to mobilize readers, for example, asking rhetorical questions, contrasting emotions, and using metaphors.

About the three hidden allegories the author talks about, they are too well “concealed” in the poem for me to see, but I do not agree with what he later says about guerrillaism and the idea that Kim Il Sung and his partisans were “defeated” by the Japanese.

The 1930s to 1940s was a transitional period in colonial Korea. Any political struggle for national liberation in such a period must adapt to the level of the society. The majority of Koreans were not educated, and most of them were not industrial workers. Most of the people were poor farmers and fishermen without technical skills, and the Japanese colonialists did not provide them with opportunities.

Kim Il Sung's political priority as a Korean Communist was to mobilize patriotic Koreans from different classes for national liberation in armed struggle against Japanese imperialism and colonialism. Guerrillaism may seem too ardent or "suicidal" to some people, but this strategy in the anticolonial struggle was a natural response to the bloody Japanese imperialist repression, fascism, and war in Asia since 1931.

Kim's guerrilla army was too small and not well organized to overcome the hundreds of thousands of Japanese army and navy troops in Korea, but the Korean partisans did not fail to achieve their goal: liberation from the Imperial Japanese colonial government in 1945. They adapted their tactics to extremely difficult situations; they collaborated with the Chinese and the Soviets; they took national leadership of North Korea; and they survived the Korean War in 1950 to 1953.

If the poem "1932" does not recognize the national conditions of Korea in the past and does not accept the role of guerrillaism in the anticolonial struggle against Japanese imperialism, such a poem would not be officially published in any magazine in North Korea. Such a poem would be rejected, and it would never be read by the public.



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