CH'OE INHUN'S *A GREY MAN*: THE STRUGGLE FOR IDENTITY AS A YOUNG, INTELLECTUAL MALE IN THE POSTWAR ERA

ANDREW LOGIE

A Grey Man[1] was first published in 1963. It is the second significant work by the novelist Ch'oe Inhun, best known for his first published work *The Square* which was written following the April 19 Revolution in 1960.

Ch'oe Inhun was born in 1936 in present day North Korea and fled to the South with the outbreak of the Korean War when in his second year of high school. Living as a refugee, his was notably the very first generation to graduate from high school in South Korea. Whilst *The Square* was written during a brief period of relaxation from severe censorship and autocratic government, by the time *A Grey Man* was written South Korea was firmly under the military dictatorship of Park Chung Hee. Ch'oe Inhun consequently describes *A Grey Man* to be:

> the record of a search in the dark for a new 'rite of passage guide' in which I had to ask myself again where am I in society and what kind of life am I living? (Ch'oe, 1997:21)

The grey man and his self in postwar South Korea

The protagonist of *A Grey Man*, Tokko Chun, is born into a landowning family in a small village not far from the port city of Wŏnsan that following liberation was to become part of North Korea. As a child and adolescent Tokko Chun defines his ego through reading. Through his study of Western literature he becomes keenly aware of himself as an individual at an early age and consequently feels alienated from the increasingly defunct values that could otherwise have defined his self as 'Korean': chiefly that is, the traditional notion of 'family.'

At odds with the ideologically charged society of North Korea, Tokko Chun becomes aware of himself in the abstract as an isolated and lonely ego. 'Lonely' is Tokko Chun's defining characteristic. It is his sincere condition and it is surely no coincidence that the characters of his unusual first name are given as those of *kodok*, the Korean for 'lonely,' in reverse.

A poignant scene unfolds early on in his youth when, during the war, South Korean

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troops reach his village in North Korea and he gets a lift on one of their trucks into Wŏnsan. It is Tokko Chun's first direct encounter with South Koreans as well as, it may be assumed, his first ride on a motor vehicle. Along the way they pass by an old farmer carrying an A-frame on his back: the archetypal, derogatory personification of 'old Korea' who, when struck by apples from the boisterous soldiers, reacts in pitiful terror. Tokko Chun's own response is twofold:

> Chun was laughing. Because the soldiers were laughing merrily he copied their expressions. He was riding the vehicle in secret. If only in expression he had to respond in kind. But **inside he felt sick with sadness and loneliness** …. (Ch'oe, 1991:58)

Already it is clear that he shares no common conscience with Koreans of the post-liberation generation on either side of the divided country.

Tokko Chun escapes to South Korea aboard a naval vessel, leaving behind his older sister and mother. However, he is at least able to live with his father who had already fled south and together they struggle against the daily cold and hunger in Pusan. There follows a brief interlude, allowing Tokko Chun to study at the makeshift high school and enter university under the semblance of family life with his Korean father working hard to support him. However, it is short lived.

> When in the spring of his second year at university his father died, Chun became an adult. It was **an icy cold despair** that the word 'sadness' cannot well express. (ibid.:63)

Thus Tokko Chun's loneliness is seen to be not self-made from a [modernist] existentialist mindset but rather derives from the tragedy of historical conditions. Separated from his mother and sister left in the North and with the death of his father, he is deprived of the family that could have defined his ego as 'Korean' and consequently he becomes an intensely isolated self.

Lacking funds to continue studying his decision to volunteer for the army is precipitated, and yet surprisingly his time spent on duty at observation posts turns out to be a life-affirming experience.

> Whilst on observation duty at the demilitarized zone he had had various thoughts but somehow had affirmed his will to live… The life instinct for Tokko Chun had come as a revelation. Life is worth living. Even without a home. Even without a father. Even with one's fatherland rotten. Humans must live, he was taught. The summer clouds flowing across the sky of the DMZ. The beautiful and mysterious night sky and the thickly grown mountain plants, [all] had taught him so. (ibid.:145)

Tokko Chun's time spent in the South Korean military is described in a retrospective soliloquy given over chiefly to the romantic contemplation of nature and his own self. Like an exiled member of the literati during the Chosŏn dynasty, he finds solace in nature and like the atheist Romantic poets of nineteenth-century England searches

for the sublime and reflection of his self therein. It is only following his discharge from the military that he becomes aware of his personal despair as, in spite of the company of his politically engaged friend Kim Hak, he finds himself alone in South Korean society, severed from family and becoming increasingly nihilistic.

The condition of 'greyness' which describes Tokko Chun's state of mind represents his dissociation from society and the few individuals such as Kim Hak whom he interacts with. He shares no common conscience because he already sees the political answers they long for—in Kim Hak's case revolution or in wider society the ideologies pushed by the two polarised regimes—as being of no 'Korean' value for Korea itself.

Tokko Chun's own answer comes instead in the form of his major studied at university, Korean literature. What this represents is that he has chosen to be Korean in a period when 'Korea' as a political nation hardly survives and Korea as a 'culture' is viewed as retrogressive in the face of Western modernity. Hence his identity in South Korea is marginalized, causing again his 'greyness', but this is also what bestows on him a historical consciousness independent of the prevailing black-and-white political climate and allows him to critically observe that

> if, instead of the foolish fight between democracy and capitalism that the South conceitedly undertook and suffered for, we had pursued a naïve nationalism with the same ardour then our circumstances would have greatly improved by now. (ibid.:100)

This statement is the conclusion to his ruminations on the concept of 'family' in the context of Korea during which he considers how a Korean's individual identity has traditionally been determined by his lineage.

Like his own self, Koreans are losing their identity because of the breakdown of this old, traditional system with no modern 'Korean' alternative for them to associate with. He observes that

> even for modern Koreans the term 'clan' strikes a deep chord yet 'nation' [remains] somehow awkward. Consequently 'race' which implies clan or extended family on a wider scale is much easier to understand. (ibid.:99)

However, this does not change the fact that Tokko Chun himself remains alone in South Korea. What does is the discovery of the Workers' Party membership card of his former brother-in-law Hyŏn Hosŭng.

Hyŏn Hosŭng had similarly fled North Korea and since made a successful career for himself as a corrupt politician in the South, taking a new wife and refusing to acknowledge any obligation towards Tokko Chun's family. The Workers' Party card Tokko Chun finds amongst some belongings of his sister proves a trump with which to blackmail his brother-in-law, simultaneously taking revenge for his sister's betrayal and securing his own financial stability.

In spite of Hyŏn Hosŭng's obvious impropriety Tokko Chun remains uneasy with the potential risk involved in the plan. This time however it is his personal isolation, with no one to endanger but himself, that gives him the necessary courage to act. In reaching this assurance for himself, Tokko Chun arrives at another revelation about his Korean ego in the modern era:

> I am alone. Having no family, I am free. God is dead. Therefore humans are free, the astute thinkers of the West perceived. For them it was correct. [But] for us it goes like this. We have no family, therefore we are free. This is our proclamation of modern times. (ibid.:110)

Thus Tokko Chun 'koreanises' Nietzsche's modernist declaration. The ability to 'koreanise' this modern, Western idea reveals the joker dealt in his hand by choosing Korean literature as his major, in place of a purely Western discipline: that of neo-traditionalism. He draws a distinction between the traditional Christian values of Europe that progressive writers such as Shelley and Nietzsche so harshly criticised, and those of pre-modern Korea which were not so much undermined by rationalist intellectuals as simply decimated during irrational foreign invasions and tragic warfare. He states clearly:

> Our god has not dwelt in the Old or New Testaments but in our *chokbo*. Our idol was not a single human bearing alone [the burden of] sin nailed to a cross but was the *chokbo* carved with clan lineage and genealogy. Because of this our god was 'family,' the 'clan.' (ibid.)

Standing from his newly gained, third position of 'Korea'—still 'grey' because of its contemporary lack of political or cultural definition—Tokko Chun is able to make the jump that had eluded Koreans in the modern era up until then and, as a Korean, renounce the values of the West for essentially not being relevant to Korea:

> The West is a two-faced Janus. Capitalism. Communism. There is no place for us. We are not leading roles, only extras. For us there is neither good nor evil. For us Koreans [uses self-deriding term *yŏmjŏn*] 'family' is first. The only thing we can truly love is 'family.' (ibid.:111)

Thus Tokko Chun has managed to define 'Koreanness' through a neo-traditionalist thought process tragically, as he is aware, for want of a family, denying himself a place therein. He has come full circle from being an isolated self, sharing no common conscience with his politically minded contemporaries, to the revelation that 'Korea' still exists as an alternative ideal to Western models; but he consequently reaffirms his own alienation as a lonely Korean in postwar South Korea.

Tokko Chun's neo-traditionalism defined: advocacy of *The Tale of Ch'unhyang*

Tokko Chun is to declare later in the novel:

> At present our entire race is essentially [already] studying abroad. What we see, listen to, the way we behave, isn't it all American culture? (ibid.:186)

His neo-traditionalist ideas are most clearly stated in conversation with Yi Yujŏng, who is a painter recently returned from studying abroad in America. The speech he delivers to her is key to the discourse of *A Grey Man* and in spite of its pessimism for the future of traditional Korean culture, on a personal level it proves the closest he gets to resolving the potential nihilism of a young intellectual male trying to subsist in postwar South Korea.

He thus proclaims, 'I have chosen *The Tale of Ch'unhyang* over *Romeo and Juliet*' (ibid.:187), though he simultaneously acknowledges that a time when *The Tale of Ch'unhyang* will become the symbolic love story throughout the world is unlikely ever to arise. In spite of this, he means he has chosen to adhere to traditional Korean culture and, being in an apparent minority of himself, it is the first clear identification of his self as an individual, defined—significantly—by a 'Korean' attribute. He believes Korean art and culture has been neglected in the process of Western modernisation and so Koreans are diminished as a people for their lack of pure artists. Consequently, although he concedes the Korean art world is quite active, it only imitates trends and styles from modern Western art, without indigenous innovation. 'Antitheses without thesis,' he declares, 'this is the climate of our art.' (ibid:188) Later on in the novel, after watching a theatrical performance of a Greek tragedy and being unimpressed with the remoteness of the play from any Korean aesthetic, he is similarly to observe that

> Koreans have a strange tendency, for with something Western, even if it's classical they feel it to be modern but with something Korean, even if it is a modern work, it feels [to them] classical or, rather, old-fashioned… (*ibid*.: 240)

He castigates too the acting in modern Korean films, 'We watch laughing. But were we to realise it is our own face, our smiles would stiffen' (ibid.:189). It is only in historical dramas he believes Korean acting becomes natural because then 'they are moving to their own rules,' otherwise, 'it becomes clumsy like a translated play as [Koreans] are wearing foreign dress but without the indigenous symbols, traditional voices or modes of speech [of that country].'

Humanism—that is to say, modernism—is not impossible for Koreans he maintains, but must be born of Korean tradition. He insists that 'resistance means

using the weapon of tradition in reverse [i.e. progressively], not using a new weapon [altogether]. For that would cause a severance rather than an antithesis' (ibid.).

Tokko Chun thus dictates the dialectic which already has an established antithesis in modernism but the thesis of which has been consistently eluding Koreans. The thesis, he asserts, is necessarily traditionalism, not Western classicism but indigenous Korean culture: this is why he chooses *The Tale of Ch'unhyang* in place of *Romeo and Juliet* and rejects the idea of Koreans staging Greek tragedies. Thus he arrives at the synthesis of neo-traditionalism. The freedom for which Koreans were liberated as individuals should have been the pursuit of this.

However history, as Tokko Chun is aware, has dictated otherwise and so he is resigned cynically to the idea that in the future,

> Ch'unhyang will have a perm, ride in cars and eventually dance to jazz. In the end even her love for Yi Mong-ryong will undergo the frightening calamity of a love [that has been reduced to] ennui. (ibid.: 189)

Conclusion

Tokko Chun continues to the end of the novel in a state of flux between the despair of an isolated ego and the existentialist mindset of a modern Korean individual who has been liberated from the traditional notion of family. His only hope is in being able to endure the present historical nightmare through his own self-reliance, as he resolves: 'If only I can endure the loneliness of a lost *chokbo*, then I may be able to see a new sun' (ibid.:279).

A descent into nihilism with the likely conclusion of suicide is thus not so much overcome as held in check by a large dose of Stoicism, derived from his will to live at all costs and affirmed in the presence of nature whilst on military duty. In spite of the modernist overtones, his remains an essentially romantic condition looking to the past in order to create a present.

This is as much as Tokko Chun manages for himself in the postwar environment of South Korea: in the absence of family, egotism is established by default as a very literal *self*-defence mechanism. Thus near the end he states defiantly, 'I have decided to rely only on the hatred my own heart believes in' (ibid.:300). This individual will to hate is in contrast to his friend Kim Hak's view that the trauma of war and ills of society are born of purely political evils: a view closer to the protagonist also of *The Square*—Yi Myŏngjun—that holds the external world to be in direct confrontation with the self.

What Tokko Chun possesses over these other young characters is a 'negative capability' expressed again in the quality of his greyness: his ability to resist oversimplification of the human condition that occurs when taking political or moral

stances. He accepts the fact that there is no immediate resolution to the plight of the Korean peninsula and that although there is a possible solution in a nationalism based on traditional Korean values that he has prescribed, it is presently not at all near to being realised.

Just as Ch'oe Inhun was in the first year to graduate from South Korean high school, Tokko Chun represents the first generation of South Koreans for whom 'Koreanness' becomes a possibility again. His affliction and loneliness stem not so much from the trauma of recent history, as seen in the protagonists of other postwar novels including *The Square*, but from the pain of one redefining him- or herself in the absence of established values. Tokko Chun charges himself with the task of creating the modern South Korean individual, and it is with these qualifications of 'modern' and 'Korean' that he forges the framework for a neo-traditional revival. For few would deny that such a process has since occurred in the brief history of South Korea, whether under the harshness of Park Chung Hee's Yushin System, during the subsequent *minjung* movement of the 1980s, or amidst the nationalistic pride that continues to infuse Koreans' appreciation for their reconstructed heritage today.

Tokko Chun's insistence of Korean value in the postwar era affects a positive challenge to reality and for modern South Koreans this has proved to be an enduring one. In Ch'oe Inhun's own words:

> I considered *A Grey Man* to be a record from the workshop of a certain **founding youth** arrested by the conviction that he must create the provisions for his rites of passage by himself. (Ch'oe, 1997:22)

Thus Tokko Chun may be considered the 'founding youth' of South Korea and a personification of the nation itself.

Note

1. Works are referred to by their titles as they have appeared in English translation, however all quotes have been translated from the original Korean by myself and lean towards academic accuracy over literary fluency. Text highlighted in bold within quotations is my own emphasis.

References

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