

Fire Flight

Playing with Fire

by Cho Chong-Rae

translated by Chun Kyung-Ja

Cornell East Asia Series (#85)

1997

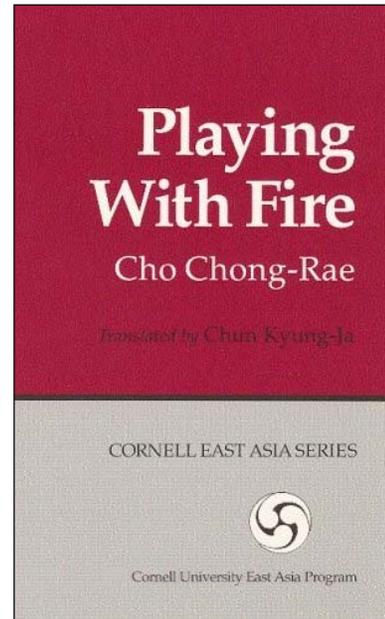
Review by Heinz Insu Fenkl (Summer 1998 issue)

Playing with Fire, by Chong-Rae Cho is a vitally important novel, particularly for readers of Korean literature in English. It won the prestigious Korean National Literature Prize upon its publication in 1982, and Cho went on to pen *The Taebaek Mountains*, a 10-volume best-selling saga that plucked the heartstrings of Korea in the late '80s. As a literary work *Playing with Fire* is somewhat flawed. As a popular work it is unusual because of its deeper layers of meaning, casting light on how national traumas continue to haunt Korean consciousness. *Playing with Fire* possesses an intricate underlying structure - one might even call it an archetypal Korean structure - that resonates profoundly throughout the book, serving as the thread that ultimately makes this otherwise melodramatic novel an indispensable example of recent Korean literature. *Playing with Fire* is the narrative of a man who believed he had transformed himself and transcended class boundaries by taking advantage of the vagaries of war and capitalism, only to find himself undone, quite literally, by the karmic repercussions of his acts.

The surface story is actually a soap opera-ish multi-generational thriller. Hwang Bokman, the very successful president of a manufacturing firm, has just completed a \$400,000 deal with the Sun Corporation when he is called, out of the blue, by a man who seems intent on blackmailing him. This man knows the dark secret of Hwang's past - that he is actually one Bae Jomsu, a former village blacksmith who became the leader of a communist partisan group just before the Korean War and murdered 38 members of the local Shin clan in Cholla Province. The mysterious caller is relentless, pursuing Hwang, slowly, deliberately, and torturously, often ending his calls with the refrain, "Mr. Bae Jomsu, haven't you lived too long?"

Cho structures the novel into a series of flashbacks, allowing Hwang's memory (and those of other characters) to fill us in on the details of his secret past. Between the relentless calls from the stranger - whom we soon learn is a surviving member of the Shin clan - we follow Hwang's former self, Bae the blacksmith, through his trajectory of humble birth, oppression by the Shin clan, and rise to power as a fiercely-devoted communist.

Bae the blacksmith is easy to identify with: he suffers all the indignities of his lower class status in relation to the Shins, who are the local landowners. We especially empathize



with him when his attempt to rescue his sister from sexual assault by some Shin boys backfires into his own punishment, his father's humiliation, and his exile from his family to become a blacksmith's apprentice. Bae, in this stage of his life, is blameless, and though we know the results of his eventual corruption, we (particularly American readers trained to identify with the underdog) remain inclined to take his side as his new incarnation, the successful president Hwang, is slowly driven to an anxiety attack by the surviving Shin.

As Hwang, who has high blood pressure, begins to collapse under the emotional and spiritual pressures brought to bear upon him, Shin contacts Hwang's son, who is a successful young college professor entirely unaware of his father's past. Cho then follows the young Hwang's point of view as he begins to investigate his father's past. This part of the novel is like a detective story, and as the young Hwang not only corroborates Shin's story but finds unexpected new twists in it, the reader becomes engaged in the narrative from yet another angle. Following the younger Hwang's investigation causes the reader to slowly change sides and begin to empathize with the Shins.

Before the young Hwang returns to the city to attend to his father, now hospitalized and on the verge of death, our sympathies and allegiances have come full circle and begun to get entangled in a series of moral complexities. In the end it is impossible to decide where to lay blame or to decide the cause of all the ensuing tragedy. All we know is that the results have been profoundly tragic and that some sort of justice must be done. Cho's justice, at the end of the novel, is both harsh and sensitive; indeed, it is the only logical way for the narrative to come to an end, and its moral lesson resonates precisely because the novel has done justice to the complexity of its moral themes.

In some respects, the language of the novel, unfortunately, is often laden with hyperbole and clichés that read as problematically in English as they do in Korean: "He nearly dropped the phone. Just as before, the voice enunciated each syllable slowly, distinctly, coldly. And the horrid laugh on the other end sent a graveyard chill through him. His composure was already gone." This literary laxity is exacerbated by the universal conventionality of such images as "shaking like a leaf," which, in English, often makes *Playing with Fire* read like a Stephen King-esque genre novel. But sometimes even such suspiciously uninspiring language is juxtaposed with a beautiful sentence, like: "One mountain carried another on its back, and that one in turn bore another on its shoulders and so on until the mountain range merged with the sky," which simultaneously conveys a vivid image and a sophisticated thematic and political rhetoric in the choice of metaphors.

When Cho writes well, it is very well. The title, for example, is especially evocative. *Playing with Fire*, has a range of appropriate multiple resonances in Korean. "Pullori" literally breaks down into pul (fire) and nori (play). In her impeccable translation of the novel, Chon Kyung-Ja has picked a wonderfully apt figure of speech for the title, providing a cautionary resonance to do justice to the complexity of the Korean and to suggest some of the multiple meanings to be derived from it. But it is impossible for the

English language to play with so many meanings so economically as Cho does with the Korean; in fact, in this respect, Cho is reminiscent of Korea's master of symbolic encoding, Hwang Sun-Won.

Playing with Fire is densely layered with symbolism throughout. Each character's name and each place name reveals a range of possible meanings too complex to summarize here. While this penchant for symbolism might seem an unnecessary affectation at times, particularly when it appears to be obvious, it would be a mistake to leap to conclusions before careful consideration of these gestures from a variety of perspectives

The novel is also layered with examples of numerological symbols. One of the most obvious of these is a repeated reference to the number 38. Cho emphasizes this national allegory by specifying the number of people Bae murdered in a scene in which Hwang understands the moral consequences of his actions as Bae: "How could he protest being sent before the 38 wronged, vengeful spirits awaiting his atonement? In their presence, he had no right to request that his own life be spared." The number 38 here corresponds to the 38th parallel, the line along which the Korean nation was arbitrarily divided, literally severing ten million family ties and symbolically killing the vitality of the Korean people. The memory of the 38 dead members of the Shin clan also resonates poignantly as the shin, that is the spirits or ghosts, of the 38. As Hwang is haunted by those ghosts, the shin/Shin, Korea is haunted by the memory of being divided along the 38th parallel; and as Hwang's guilt is instigated by his association with communism, the two Koreas should resonate with the guilt of their complicity with the superpowers that divided their people. (One cannot also help but read a critique of modernity in the resonance of the shin ghosts with the shin of newness.)

The underlying religious themes in the novel are drawn from a mix of Animism, Shamanism, Taoism, Buddhism, and Christianity in a way that reflects Korea's rich mix of religious traditions, and Cho orchestrates his allusions in a way that makes each of these religious threads significant to the outcome of the novel. The political themes in Playing with Fire are equally complex, and in the end, Cho's novel - flaws included - is uncannily reminiscent of Korean literature written during the Japanese occupation. I was left with the strong sense that perhaps the surface melodrama and the literary clichés were all ingeniously-devised ways of camouflaging an intensely political message. Indeed, Playing with Fire is a profound cautionary tale as Chun's translation of the title suggests, and it is especially ironic that it would win the Korean National Literature Prize from a government that seems, since 1982, to have blindly ignored its underlying message.