

# Heading for Moscow

(*Mosukuwa sashite*) (1928)

Written by Shigeharu NAKANO (1902-79)

Translated by Annika A. Culver

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## Introduction

In the mid-twenties to early thirties, the proletarian literature and arts movements flourished among left-oriented cultural producers in Tokyo, Japan's imperial capital, and even influenced those in the colonies, including Korea and southeastern Manchuria. Known for his novels, poetry, and political activism expressing leftwing ideals, Japanese author Nakano Shigeharu (1902-79) wrote criticism and short stories while connecting with a larger Tokyo-based network of East Asian leftist activists. An important, though often overlooked, text expressing his knowledge of these connections is the proletarian writer's 1928 short story, *Mosukuwa sashite* [Heading for Moscow], serialized in six installments in the *Musansha shimbun* [Proletarian Times]. This publication served as the legal newspaper of the banned Japanese Communist Party. However, the 1925 Peace Preservation Act had outlawed the JCP, forcing proponents of Communism underground, or led to their views being expressed in indirect ways, such as through self-censored literature like this work.

This vivid tale points to Nakano's in-depth knowledge of just how hard his Korean comrades endeavored to receive their directives from the Comintern in Moscow, and thereby, hasten the desired independence of their country.<sup>1</sup> The Korean independence movement, arising out of the March 1919 protests in Seoul, led to harsh surveillance of the Korean population by the Governor-General's office. Nonetheless, some Koreans surmounted countless obstacles to obtain information about revolutionary liberation from their newly established Soviet neighbor to the north. By showcasing their efforts, the Japanese proletarian author lends his support to an anti-imperialist orientation in his leftwing views, and contributes his literary force to a greater, transnational struggle centered on a revolutionary pathway inspired by communist Russia. In early Shōwa Japan, proponents of the proletarian literature movement like Nakano truly believed that literature could profoundly influence the social consciousness of readers, and therefore, provide the masses with the inspiration to change their world. To achieve this goal, literary works and the arts had to be accessible to a greater mass audience through the "massification of the arts" [*geijutsu taishūka*], with writers engaging

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<sup>1</sup> For more information about Korean leftists in Japan and their connections to the international communist movement, see Robert Scalapino and Chong-Sik Lee, Communism in Korea: The Movement (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972).

a mass readership. This belief in the revolutionary import of literature no doubt led Nakano and others to sympathize with their numerous Korean comrades encountered in Tokyo, and play their part as writers in building a movement that would allow Koreans to finally implement the self-determination they so desired.

Though a minor work criticized for its naïve understanding of the Korean Independence Movement,<sup>2</sup> “Heading for Moscow” is important in that it showcases a little known aspect of Nakano’s work: his refined geographical knowledge of a kind of “underground railroad” for Korean leftists, where adherents of the Korean communist party travelled secretly through colonial Korea, Manchuria, and Mongolia, to arrive in Chita, where the Trans-Siberian Railroad would bring them to Moscow. The first installment in Proletarian Times includes a tiny woodblock print of a map of Asia illustrating the journey of the story’s protagonists and inserts it into a global context. The path that the two main characters Lee and Chô trace on foot, proceeds in a roughly northwesterly direction, paralleling the China Eastern Railroad, and begins in the northernmost portion of Korea at the edges of the Long White Mountain range near Tumen and Yanji. However, the road was fraught with danger, which could include Manchuria’s infamous bandits, ruthless smugglers, and the dreaded Japanese military police at certain checkpoints like rail-lines and bridges.

Nakano had several Korean friends, and it is possible that he first heard this story from them. Most studies of the author’s later works translated into English have featured his well-cited 1929 poem, *Ame no furu Shinagawa Eki* [Rain Falling on Shinagawa Station], which also mentions his Korean comrades. Indeed, the tale of the travails of the older Lee and his younger counterpart, Chô, as they make their way towards Moscow despite all kinds of obstacles, if read aloud, sounds more like oral narrative recounted to a rapt audience, than a written work in print. It also proceeds in a kind of *michi-yuki* [travel account] fashion.

For the two protagonists of the story, political conditions in the warlord Zhang Zuolin’s realm of northern Manchuria were less risky than in Korea for carrying out the mission by foot, as it was farther away from the net of Japanese control concentrated in the far southeast of the region’s Liaodong Peninsula. (When the story appeared in Proletarian Times, Zhang had already been assassinated in a plot by Kantô Army officers, and rightwing proponents in Japan would progressively view the region as necessary for inclusion into a more direct sphere of Japanese control, even prior to the 1931 Manchurian Incident). Nevertheless, the sparsely populated steppe lands with patches of forest near the mountains, harbored mounted bandits, who would raid villages and harass passers-by to loot their possessions. The tale somewhat implausibly ends with Chô indeed captured by bandits and strung up in a tree. However, we as readers, are left hanging after the sixth installment to wonder what will happen next as Chô thankfully

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<sup>2</sup> Though clearly inspired by his interactions with Korean friends, Nakano’s vision of Korean independence seemingly echoes that of Japanese leftists, rather than the resident Korean activists. See, for example, Sô Donjû (Seo Dongju), *Teijûsha no inai Manshû / “Takumashiki” Chôsenjin* [A Manchuria Without Permanent Residents: “Intrepid” Koreans] in *Nihongo to Nihon bungaku* [Japanese Language and Japanese Literature] Issue 43 (August 31, 2006) Tsukuba University Kokugo kokubun gakkai, 25-36.

lets out a breath, in a hopeful image of a dark night sky illumined by brightly flickering stars. Somehow, even with the story discouragingly truncated in this manner, we gain the impression that our two protagonists—one with youthful pluck, and the other with the resigned perseverance of late middle-age—will eventually succeed in their mission, though it might not proceed in exactly the way they had hoped, to meet the proper representative, on time, at the Chita train station.

Though criticized by Japanese scholars for its literary quality, this story is an intriguing piece penned by Nakano as a young, idealistic author in the influential Japanese proletarian literature movement, who was just hitting his stride in his mid-twenties. His early literary production sheds light on his desire to connect with broader, transnational anti-imperialist movements, and adds a new dimension of socio-historical complexity for an English-language readership who might only be familiar with the author's more famous later works and postwar political career.

### **Notes on the Translation:**

My translation comes directly from the original text in Proletarian Times, and attempts to preserve the language and instances of censorship as it actually appeared in 1928. In the postwar period, many authors slightly revised (or corrected) portions of their prewar writings in their *zenshû* [collections of literary works], so I have attempted to remain faithful to the original while consulting the *zenshû*. The original text also contains *rubi* [pronunciation markers in *hiragana* script], allowing readers with a basic level of education to read the story, and thus contributes to the desired "massification" of the piece. Also, the names of Lee and Chô preserve the original Japanese pronunciation to highlight the fact that this story is a *Japanese* understanding of the (fictionalized) experience of these two archetypal Korean protagonists on a political mission.