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Article

National Division,
Rural Lives, and Anti-war Sentiment
in Cha Beom-seok's *Forest Fire*

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Introduction

Winning the *Chosun ilbo* newspaper's *Sinchun munye*¹ prize for drama two years running in 1955 and 1956 respectively with his plays *Moonshine* and *Homecoming*,² Cha Beom-seok³ made a bold first appearance on Korea's literary scene. His name became synonymous with the Korean stage, enjoying a long and successful career, and he has gone down as one of the most popular dramatists in the nation's history. Despite a significant body of work, his play *Forest Fire*,⁴ which first premiered in 1962, has attracted the most interest out of all his works.

Upon its release, *Forest Fire* defied convention, achieving both critical and commercial acclaim during a time when the nation was still recovering from the socio-economic and psychological traumas of war and national division, which understandably had a negative effect on theatre attendance (Lee 2003, 99). Thus, the work has come to be known for longevity, continuing to be played consistently since its first run in the National Theatre in a variety of formats, such as both large and small-scale productions as well as film and musical adaptations.

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1. The *Sinchun munye* is an annual spring literary contest, a platform of high recognition and prestige for new writers, arranged by the national daily newspapers of the Republic of Korea. In the New Year they offer prizes for a number of categories such as novels, poetry, and drama, and the winning literary works are published in a collection.
 2. *Moonshine* was awarded a runner up prize while *Homecoming* was the outright winner.
 3. Born in Mokpo, South Jeolla province in 1924 Cha Beom-seok grew up under Japanese colonial rule. He graduated high school in 1942 and left for Japan where he stayed in Tokyo for two years. After returning back to his hometown, he trained as a teacher and worked at Pukkyo Elementary School. He was drafted into the Japanese army in 1945 but he soon returned to teaching at his old job after liberation. Cha went on to attend Yeonhui College, present day Yonsei University, where he majored in English literature. Due to the outbreak of the Korean War, Cha's education was halted, again returning to his hometown to teach. The 1950s were the decade that saw Cha's first early signs of success through his very first play, *Stars Come Out Every Night* that was performed at a festival organised by the Mokpo Cultural Society. Cha enjoyed a long and successful career, working on plays, literary criticism, translations and adaptations of foreign literature, and drama as well as TV, film, and radio productions. In his later years, he was the chairman of the board for the Korean Theatrical Association and the vice-chairman for the Federation of Artistic and Cultural Organization of Korea. He also taught at Cheongju University's Theatre and Film department. Cha died in 2006.
 4. This play has been referenced a number of times in English language academia, though often with differing translations of the title. For example, *Sanbul*, in Korean, has been translated as *Forest Fire*, *Burning Mountain and Fire in the Mountain*. Throughout this article, I will solely refer to the play as *Forest Fire*. All translations are my own from the Korean, though a full translation by Janet Poole has been published, cf. *Modern Korean Drama* edited by Richard Nicols (2011).

When it became clear that the division of the nation would become long-term, both sides set out ideological limitations on writers: “In South Korea all literary works felt to exhibit leftist tendencies were prohibited; instead, works and writers espousing the ideology of conservative nationalism gained dominance” (Yi and Teague 2005, 29). The theatre was no exception to this, as this can be seen from the fact that “during the war [the theatre] instilled the audience with an anti-communist awareness” and even after the war had come to an end, this practice continued “in order to make sure the invasive war of communism would not arise again and to maintain people’s vigilance towards it” (Kim 1998, 288).⁵ Due to the heavy restrictions and monitoring of literary works to seek out leftist tendencies, many writers actively filtered themselves and began infusing their writing with nationalistic sentiment built on a staunch anti-communist rhetoric that drew on harrowing events of the times. Not all writers, however, wrote within these guidelines and many, rather than pointing to a particular enemy or source of the South’s problems, instead focused on the universality of the conflict’s far-reaching destruction, presenting war *as it was*, and thus a whole host of more unbiased realist writing also appeared at this time.

Cha is by far most renowned for his realist dramas,⁶ mainly focusing on the most powerless of individuals caught up in the nation’s division. *Forest Fire* is significant in that it falls somewhere in between his early realist era of writing as well as his later focus on human desire that developed in the 1960s, making for a more multi-faceted play ripe for interpretation.⁷ The play focuses on ordinary, rural individuals living in P Village in the Sobaek mountains caught up in the

5. Author’s own translation.

6. Cha also wrote extensively on the theatre, literary criticism, and writing and realism. Some key examples include: *Mueoseul eotteoke sseul geosinga* (1967); *Rieollijeum yeongu sogo* (1968); *Huigok eun wae sseuneunga* (1987a); *Rieollijeum yeongeuk* (1987b); and *Rieollijeum yeongeuk ui jaehwagin* (1990).

7. Cha’s literary career can be divided into three distinct stages—the first beginning from 1956 after Cha first appeared in print when he started activities with the Production Theatrical Society. Choe refers to this time as the “formation period of his consciousness” as a writer. During this period, Cha’s works focused on showing the post-war era society “as it was” and is thus the era in which his most realist works came to fruition. From 1963, Cha proclaimed “the popularisation of the theatre,” creating the theatre group Sanha. This era being characterized as a more specific “defining era” of his career, with works branching out and focusing on the more detailed thematic elements of instinctual desire and issues relating to love. Finally, in 1983, after the disbanding of Sanha he spent his time mainly as a theatre administrator and teaching at university. Still, one of the stand-out characteristics of this time in his career is that he sought new assessments of pioneering characters “caught in the vortex of modern Korean history” (Choe 2003, 10). Author’s own translation.

quagmire of the war in 1951. At the time of its first showing, *The Korean War* (1950-1953) was still somewhat fresh in people's minds and hearts and the difficult era that followed was to ultimately greatly shape the artistic direction of Cha's work.⁸ Cha's relationship with the war was very direct, "during his school days, the Korean War began and he walked from Seoul with his family for 17 days and for Cha Beom-seok who had arrived back at his hometown, war meant 'hunger' and it was a shocking experience that upturned his world in one morning" (Choe 2003, 17).⁹ Drawing on his experiences traveling back to his hometown, *Forest Fire* thus focuses on the individual rural dwellers caught up in the chaos away from the cities, and how their voices are extinguished from the greater narrative of their nation's history. In this, Cha demands the audience to look closer at the conflict and the destructive nature of the ideologically focused war, rather than just interpreting it through the more simplified *us vs. them* lens of the more common North-South dichotomy that typified the post-war epoch.

Due to his synonymity with realist writing, research on Cha's work naturally focuses on the realist elements of his work. However, due to the times in which many of Cha's most well-known plays appeared, opinions of the underlying messages of his plays have proven to be diverging, with a number of academics interpreting aspects of Cha's work as being anti-communist. For example, Jeong (2009, 56) states that anti-communism can be found running through the foundations of his work and additionally, the characters in his plays are passive personalities that can't become main agents. Hong (1998, 272) in particular sees Cha's war plays as being actually *about* the partisans with elements of anti-communism seen throughout his career. These interpretations have been further exacerbated by Cha's play, *The Forest of Slaughter*. Premiering in 1976, the play, which can be seen as a prequel to *Forest Fire*, actually won the Republic of Korea's 3rd Anti-communist Literary Award. This has undoubtedly affected interpretations of Cha's work despite Cha's own rebuttal.¹⁰

8. It is important to note that Cha's relationship with realist writing began before the war through his relationship with realist writer Yu Chi-jin (b. 1905), but his experiences of the war further solidified his vision of presenting a visceral reality and not diluting history and personal experience.

9. Author's own translation.

10. Cha (1982, 275; qtd. in Jeong 2009, 47) himself rebuked this assessment of him, saying: "For a long time, the thought of having to project a cross-section of the horrible history that we went through onto the stage came to fruition whilst writing *The Forest of Slaughter*...meaning I merely consider this work as being written out of a hunger for humanism, not as an anti-communist work ending in a rallying cry." Author's own translation.

This paper follows a growing trend that argues that the interpretation of *Forest Fire* as an “anti-communist play” and Cha an “anti-communist writer” as being possibly too narrow an interpretation that focuses too heavily on the greater literary trends and socio-political atmosphere at the time rather than examining in detail the mechanics of the play itself while also ignoring evidence of Cha’s life that potentially points to the contrary. It is true that the dominant ideology of the North does appear across many of his plays in a negative light, and it can also be argued that the play falls in line with many other anti-communist works of the time. This paper asserts that there is, however, no real solid evidence of Cha aiming to write overtly anti-communist writing and there is evidence of him being critical of *both* sides during the war, especially in *Forest Fire*.

This paper aims to take a more balanced look at the play, instead seeing a well-defined *anti-war* message, critical of war as a whole; and this belief is influenced by Cha’s own experiences of the war which runs through the heart of the drama, focusing on the effects it had on those caught in the middle. In presenting the war in a different light from the North vs. South dichotomy, Cha’s main exploration is focused on presenting to the audience the follies of war with realist aspects highlighting the overlooked, subtle ways in which war can infect communities, destroying long built trust and also destroying an individual’s relationships with other human beings. This message can be seen not only in his use of the historical background, where he focuses on the hysteria and distrust that infected tight-knit communities, but also in the subtle dialogues between characters, his explorations of love and desire during times of war, and finally his exploration of stage design and the greater *mise-en-scène* as a means of communication to an audience.

Ideological Conflict and Distrust among the Villagers

Cha Beom-seok’s post-war writing is characterised by a deep sense of verisimilitude, aiming to bring alive the destitution and horrors of war on stage drawing on his own experiences as well as others around him. On the performance pamphlets of the first stage production of *Forest Fire*, Cha explained his motivations for writing a play that takes place in a rural area caught up in the war:

My motivation for writing *Forest Fire*...was because I wanted [us] to observe on the stage the pain that our people endured, even the pain of those living far off in the mountains. Of course, these people that we call our neighbours—the poor but continuing to live on, plagued by suffering, unable to eat nor learn—were significant motivation enough, but I also thought how the fatalistic theory in which the mountain both kills and saves human beings, and this sense of futility could potentially become a significant motif in drama. (Jeong 2009, 33; author's own translation)

For Cha, the war's negative impact was at the forefront of his mind and bringing this negativity to life and presenting it to an audience was vital to his message. As mentioned upon the breakout of the war, Cha moved throughout the country, witnessing the changes that the war brought about¹¹ and was influenced by the ensuing social division among ordinary people. Tension, distrust, and suspicion resulting from ideological conflict was a real reflection of the times, particularly for those caught up in rural areas where the Reds and Reactionaries came and went. Kim Dong-chun (2006, 121) defines Korea as a “refugee society” during these times, stating that “in a refugee society, everyone prepares to leave and everyone faces everyone else as someone met in a place for refugees and everyone...is intend on the pursuit of immediate gains and saving one's own life.” This atmosphere was created by the ideological conflict of the war where trust and human compassion are eroded in order to survive. People believe they live in “a war of all against all” leading to everyone only caring “about self-preservation and their own interests rather than respecting social order or rules” (Kim 2015, 63).¹²

The village in *Forest Fire* has found itself in the middle of a battleground between the North's People's Army and the South's Reactionary forces. Both

11. Cha setting *Forest Fire* in the Sobaek mountains is based not only around his own experiences traveling through the country, but he also relied on the experiences of others: “Even though I've stated that the village is located in the Sobaek mountain range, I actually wrote the play envisaging mount Woelchul in Yeongnam. Some people have said it to be based around mount Jiri and others mount Baekun and I've never negated that was the case....the reality [of the tragedy of the war] was the same wherever you were. Be it mount Halla, Odae, Mudung, Ipam—all were no exception. It was only while I was teaching in my hometown of Mokpo that I used stories of what other's saw and heard and I applied them to Yeongnam, and through my writer's imagination, I put it down in writing” (Cha 1884, 45). Author's own translation.

12. This quotation from Kim Yunjong draws on an excerpt from Thomas Hobbes' (b. 1588) *Leviathan*. Cf. Tuck 2004, 88.

armies frequently move in and out of the region, leaving the village at mercy to whoever appears next and are forced to comply with their demands; the fact that the needs of the villagers come second to those of the soldiers is reiterated throughout the performance. This environment of tension and suspicion is poignantly summed up in a discussion between Jeom-rye, one of the younger women of the village who does not know the whereabouts of her husband and a female merchant passing through the village. Her and Jeom-rye share a poignant moment of reflection on the nation's situation and the fate of the men of the village

Jeom-rye: What happened was shocking. As soon as they gathered under Rabbit Rock, the Southern Army was brandishing their guns and blades, saying "all those who're against communism, step out of line." So because they were all afraid, every one of those men threw up their hands and stepped forward. It was then that the guns started firing.

Peddler woman: Yep. So they were actually the Reds after all, scheming to figure out where their alliances belonged with trickery... tsk tsk.

Peddler woman: We're a people subjected to endless horror! Killed while going up, beaten while going back down...what are we people, just fair game to be beaten and killed...?

(*Forest Fire* 61)

Cha uses this retelling of the fate of the village men for contextual realism, as an example of the horrors that rural dwellers faced living in the battlegrounds between North and South that frequently moved back and forth during the war. The Communist forces kill the men of the village by tricking them all. In this, the soldiers demonstrate that one simply having or supporting an ideology different from one's own is grounds enough to sentence you to death. Though it is possible to interpret this ideologically-focused execution of the men of the village as a key event that demonstrates evidence of Cha's anti-communist stance in *Forest Fire*, Yun however, argues that in a similar way, both in real life and in the play itself, the Nationalists too, for the exactly same reason, sought to root out the Communists, regardless of them committing any crime. Since they supported a different ideology they too must die:

All the inhabitants of P village are revealed to be innocent individuals through the dialogues of the characters. Thus, the author, rather than seeing ideological problems as being the fault of the P villagers, instead finds fault in the history and era. It is because of this very point that *Forest Fire* is not a simple anti-communist melodrama, but it is a play that, in painting the life of the common people who are suffering in the war itself, holds persuasive power. Another of *Forest Fire's* good points is the fact that it embodies a native realism and outstanding dramaturgic techniques beyond any other works. (qtd. in Yun 2003, 72; author's own translation)

In *Forest Fire*, one of the clearest ways in which Cha presents to the audience his view on the futility of war and the destruction of a nation split in two over ideological differences is bringing the overarching foreboding presence of distrust, suspicion, and accusation present during the epoch mentioned by Kim, and condensing it among the villagers of P village. Cha presents this distrust and fear of one another's accusations as a metaphorical disease that has infected the fabric of the village. At times, the villagers fail to cooperate, often descending into fits of anger and distrust with accusations flying. With all the men from the village dead or disappeared,¹³ the women have been left to survive by their own means but due to the on-going conflict, they have been left with little food. From the play opening's scene, the stage is set for the difficulties facing the women of the village. Mrs. Yang, de-facto village leader, is collecting rice to hand over to the Communist guerrillas despite leaving them with little to feed themselves:

Mrs. Yang (*while measuring out rice with the hop dish*): Nope, this doesn't even make up a full hop's worth! (*Staring at Mrs. Choe*)

Mrs. Choe (*high and mightily*): Well I ladled that out and came thinking it was a decent amount! Who around here can get together a whole hop's worth of rice... (*Glancing away*)

Mrs. Yang (*spitting out a bitter laugh*): When it comes to being poor, we're all one of the same. Stop all this, fill it up and bring it back! If you have no rice, then barley. No barley, then even potatoes will do...

(*Forest Fire* 13)

13. The only remaining male is Old Kim, who is completely senile and spends most of the play randomly calling out for food.

As seen above, from the play's opening scene, conflict between Mrs. Choe and Mrs. Yang takes centre stage. This conflict stems from ideological forces that surround them but it is clear the villagers live simple, rural lives with little to no ideological affiliation. Yet they are constantly caught in the middle and have become victims of division. The victims of the war are far reaching and even the relationships of a once close-knit village have already begun to deteriorate as the women face starvation. The distrustful climate mentioned by Kim (2006) and Kim (2015) of wartime Korea continues on from this opening scene of rice collection. The village is forced beyond its will and despite Mrs. Choe bringing what she has, it does not fill her individual quota. This causes an argument and accusations fly on both sides:

Mrs. Yang: You think we can't do it because we're lazy? When the Self-Defence Force come, I'll just tell them the truth—how you lot don't cooperate so we can't do it!

Mrs. Choe: Yeah yeah! You mean saying it like that so you can slyly rat me out, yeah? Well, if you plan to fess me up, then go right ahead! Let's see who they believe.

.....

Mrs. Choe: Hm! You think we don't know what you're up to? No matter how much cunning and craftiness you try and shake off, you'll never shake off being labelled a reactionary! You can't! (*Hearing this, the villagers started to get agitated which that they had not before. However, Old Mr. Kim as if without any concern, just continues to puff away on a cigarette.*)

.....

Mrs. Yang: why are you bringing up other people's dead kids?

.....

Mrs. Choe (*brazenly*): Of course it's related isn't it...your mother-in-law says that she's been forced into being village leader with no other alternative by the Self-Defence Force, but actually through acting like such a great leader, all she's doing is faking loyalty. Isn't she?

Mrs. Yang: Well! You've certainly got a lot to say! Well, whose fault was it that got my son branded a reactionary?

Mrs. Choe: Hm! Well what comes around goes around. Those bastards that killed my son-in-law as a Red, they're all my enemies! Why would I just bend over for those bastards who made my daughter Sa-wol a young widow? Times have changed now, so we also have to try and live as well as we can!

(*Forest Fire* 15)

As can be felt from this argument, Cha builds on the distrust and suspicion that has infected the village women left behind, a group, which once would have been a close community. What is clear from Yang and Choe's bickering is that, despite the greater ideological divide in which the Korean peninsula has been subjected to, there is no real understanding of the great ideological battle on an individual level. Be it on the side of the North or South, any form of alliance with either threatens their livelihood but both are seemingly blinded. The clash between Mrs. Yang and Mrs. Choe verges on humorous, with Cha ultimately hinting at the meaninglessness of this quarrel. Nobody in this village can win this fight and neither woman is right or wrong. It is merely a critique of the ideological war that is raging and the representation of the rural individuals caught in the crossfire.

As the two elders fight in vain, Kap, one of their neighbours—a character that Cha uses a number of times throughout the play as a device to express his anti-war ideals, reiterates, “for stupid folk like us, things never change. When they tell us to go somewhere, we'll just be dragged there anyway. They say go somewhere else, and we wobble on over...that's what happens, isn't it?” (*Fire Forest* 18). Kap candidly highlights the way in which the village has become absorbed by the war and they are powerless against it. Ideological conflict reigns over them and wreaks havoc with their once peaceful lives whether they like it or not. Despite the difficulties that the villagers face and the chance of death from both North and South always near, they fail to truly cooperate among themselves and trust one another, further proving Kim's point about wartime Korean society.

Cha frames the play nicely, showing this intensity of people's anger, confusion, and distrust of each other, at both the opening and the play's finale, giving an overarching sense that these feelings of fear and distrust of one another have constantly been lurking in the back of everyone's minds throughout the drama. It is clear by the final act, that the suspicion, accusation, and distrust that has infected the village cannot be cured. It is a perpetual, omnipresent force and a symptom of the greater ideological forces that have been sweeping over the whole peninsula. At the start of the final act, Mrs. Choe and Mrs. Yang are arguing in the yard to sounds of heavy gunfire. After Sa-wol decides to involve herself with “looking after” Gyu-bok in the bamboo grove, many of the village women suspect she is showing signs of pregnancy. With no men in the village, this indicates Sa-wol has been harboring a fugitive. Mrs. Choe turns on Mrs.

Yang, demanding she fess up who is spreading “rumours” about Sa-wol:

Mrs. Yang (*answering firmly*): That’s right! I’m not telling so what ya gunna do? Hm? Gunna go to our visitors in the mountains and rat me out? The world has changed so you go try and tell them to cut off my head! Hm! (*Sneering*)

Mrs. Choe: Right! You’re full of it! Now the National Army is back, seems you’re planning on getting revenge. Well, good, do what you want! (*Seething*) but when it comes to suffering, everyone’s the same. If any woman in this village hasn’t cooperated with them in the mountains, then I say step forward. After all, if I’m screwed, then I may as well get you all too.... Anyone here who hasn’t given food to them before? Anyone not done night duty? Well? Then what about this loyal bitch, so-called “village leader,” who’s she?

.....

Neighbour lady, Kap (*cutting in between Yang and Choe*): What are you both going on about? Raking up the past...tsk tsk. Is there anyone these days who is whiter than white? Have we lived until now the way we chose to live? We haven’t, have we? (*Everyone shows signs of agreement.*) That’s how it was for us under the Japanese, and that’s how it’s been since liberation too...

(*Forest Fire* 96-97)

Neighbour Kap sums up the futility of suspicion and accusations. While liberation from Japanese colonial grip was seen as a new start, the war’s all encompassing destruction ruined it all. On the most basic of levels, two simple village women Choe and Yang can be seen as having few differences. Be that as it may, Cha presents both as irrational, angry, and suspicious of each other from start to finish. As the play draws to a close, it becomes clear that there are far more than three victims of this tragedy. Though we see Sa-wol commit suicide, also killing her unborn child and also Gyu-bok executed by the Nationalists, the play ultimately ends alluding to the death of P village itself. It is in this that one can argue against the anti-communist stance when analysing *Forest Fire*. As Yu (1988, 531) argues, Cha Beom-seok is a “humanist” who has a passion for all the victims of the conflict. He adds that “the classes that suffer are almost always the ignorant and simple ordinary folk, and the assailants are those in power or war itself. This is a significant trend in *Forest Fire*” (ibid.; author’s own translation).

Though both Sa-wol and Gyu-bok are physical victims of the poisonous conflict, what Cha presents to his audience is greater loss of the *Korean spirit* as the most overlooked victim of the War. While Gyu-bok can be interpreted as a victim of communism, “Gyu-bok isn’t the only victim. The victims that were killed meaninglessly in the war were numerous, and the widows of the village are a collective group of victims” (Yu 1988, 532). Throughout the play *neither* side of the ideological spectrum has treated the women fairly. As the play ends, Mrs. Choe is crying not only for her dead daughter, but also for the loss of a nation—the final realisation that this conflict has destroyed all their lives. The threat of the titular “Forest Fire” has loomed over them from the beginning and the village’s decay is a metaphor; and the village is a microcosm of the peninsula as a whole and its destruction is an allegory for all of the ways in which war itself, not necessarily a single ideology, can be thoroughly destructive. Just like war, the fire consumes all that is in its path regardless of which side one supports.

Reclaiming Lost Love in an Empty Village—Jeom-rye, Gyu-bok, and Sa-wol’s Love Triangle

As has been explored, Cha uses the fraught relationships among villagers who were once close throughout *Forest Fire* as a device to highlight the follies of war and the damage that ideological conflicts can impose on small communities. This tension and distrust being a real characteristic of the “refugee society” of defending for oneself that became the norm during the conflict between North and Southern forces.

Published in 1962, *Forest Fire* finds itself somewhere between Cha’s first and second phase of dramatic writing; around this time he began to develop and interest in the exploration of desire and matters of love. As a result, an important aspect of *Forest Fire* is the impact of war on love, sex, and male-female relationships in times of deprivation and national crisis. Biographer Richard Holmes writes on war and sexuality, making a number of interesting statements and discussing the contradictory nature of human behaviour and sexuality at times of war:

The close affinity between love and war is an enduring feature of both

history and mythology. At its most obvious and superficial level, this relationship is reflected by soldiers' almost universal preoccupation with sex....Not only are the inhibitions on sexual expression lowered, but there exists a much more passionate interest of the sexes in each other than is the case in peacetime....It wasn't that you were in love with anyone in particular...it was simply that you took a quite special delight in female society, and without any real planning to, you yet did all in your power to attract them....Some soldiers, albeit a minority, succeed in sublimating their sexual desires, diverting the energy which might otherwise have been expended into an intense concern for their profession. Baynes suggests that many upper-middle-class Englishmen of the early years of this century blotted sex out of their lives altogether. (Holmes 1985, 93)

From Holmes' writing, one can ascertain the complicated and often polarising outcomes that war can have on human desire depending on either acting on or suppressing one's desires.

As Cha developed an interest in the relationship between war and sexuality from the beginning of the 1960s, one can argue that *Forest Fire's* love triangle between Jeom-rye, whose husband has gone missing, *accused* of being a Red, and Sa-wol, whose husband was killed for *being* a Red, as well as Gyu-bok, a former teacher and now communist *deserter*, used as a melodramatic relationship to drive the narrative and attract audiences interested in a love story. However, in exploring their passion and desire and the way in which it is at odds with the barrenness and depravation of war, Cha makes another critical assessment of war and conflict. One can argue that the war itself has stripped the characters of *Forest Fire* of the chance of sexual fulfillment. The women of the village particularly corroborate this hypothesis; starved of sexual fulfillment and loving affection, they pine for their men throughout the play; while these women are deprived of the chance to enact their desires and have no choice but to lament the loss of the males in their lives. For Jeom-rye, Sa-wol, and Gyu-bok, when the opportunity to partake in their desires arises in the bamboo grove, it is too much to hold back.

Solider Gyu-bok, having deserted the communists, appears at the end of Act 3 Scene 2. There is a commotion in the village after the alarm has been sounded due to a sign of a possible intruder. Gyu-bok appears and threatens Jeom-rye with a knife. Despite his dramatic entry onto the stage, Gyu-bok needs help and appears as a nervous, injured man, fearful of reprisal and stuck

in the middle of an ideological battle and a war he wants no part in. Though the greater village dynamic is an important focus of the play, the dynamics of the relationship that plays out between Gyu-bok and the two village women arguably forms the dramatic heart of the work. These three characters are starved of desire, love, and humanity, and Cha uses their relationship as a means of exploring the far-reaching damages of war. The bamboo grove functions as an important location for the three lovers—it is not only a hideaway for Gyu-bok to escape from the duties forced upon himself by the division of the peninsula and an ideology he doesn't believe in, but it is also a space of *reclamation* where the three characters are able to reclaim what the war has stolen from them. Here they express their emotions and find sexual gratification, allowing themselves to break from the present and returning to a more primordial past.

Regarding Jeom-rye, a suffering woman still coming to terms with the disappearance of her husband, Cha writes a tender thread of love between her and Gyu-bok in an otherwise desperately sad story of poverty, desolation, and death. Act 3 Scene 2 opens to a change of set, with Gyu-bok and Jeom-rye hidden away in the bamboo grove. The change of set highlights the significance of the bamboo grove as a place of *refuge* from the horrors of war where they can return to feeling like human beings again:

Gyu-bok: Now I finally feel like I know what it means to be alive. From the day that you hid me in bamboo grove, for the whole time that's all I've been able to think about.

.....
 Gyu-bok: You don't have to understand! Just as long as we're here like this, close...*(While saying this, his grips Jeom-rye's waist tighter.)*

Jeom-rye *(trying to fight against her raging desires, she closes her eyes)*: Ah, stop. If you keep on like this...I'll...*(Despite this, she gives up her body for Gyu-bok to do as he pleases.)*

Gyu-bok: It's true, as you said I am a criminal. Still, I can't deny the fact that I like you. You saved my life and you've given me back love which I thought I had lost and...*(Showing signs of difficulty holding back his own desires.)*

(Forest Fire 66-67)

The bamboo grove becomes a metaphorical marital bed for both characters; they have broken away from the horrors and destitution of their lives caught up in

the ideological battlefield of the mountains, and as can be seen, here they have regressed to a pre-war state of passion and fulfillment; throughout the play, the overarching dualities of North vs. South, Communism vs. Nationalism, and the village vs. the outside world pause, as man and woman become united in love and pre-war sexual gratification. Just the touch of Gyu-bok alone is powerful enough to send Jeom-rye into a frenzy of ecstasy. The war has robbed her of her husband and she responds to his touch as a human being reconnecting with both herself and her past.

Sa-wol is presented as a strong antithesis to Jeom-rye. While Jeom-rye's character is tender, yet fearful and vulnerable, Sa-wol appears as overtly sexual, playful and even manipulative. She is deprived of sex and forward enough to pursue it without a second thought. After Jeom-rye confides in her about her hiding of Gyu-bok, Sa-wol attempts to take control, even blackmailing Jeom-rye to allow her to "take care of him" too. Jeom-rye confesses that he's "a Red." At first, Sa-wol is confused as to why she chose to save him, questioning whether he could have killed Jeom-rye's husband but soon Sa-wol's thoughts on the situation change drastically:

Sa-wol (*the sparkle in her eye changes*): Why did you save the guy? Don't you hate him?

Jeom-rye: Is there love and hate? I just felt sorry for him somehow.

.....

Sa-wol (*she looks at Jeom-rye, burning with passion*): Yeah! There's no way you'd know what the frustrations of a women going it alone are, anyway. You're lucky, Jeom-rye.

Jeom-rye: Me?

Sa-wol: Because you've got a good man, haven't you? (*She lets out a dirty laugh.*)

Jeom-rye (*embarrassed*): Oh my... (*She turns away from her.*)

Sa-wol (*edging closer*): Jeom-rye!

Jeom-rye (*standing, she keeps one ear on Sa-wol's words*)

Sa-wol: I wanna help that guy too.

(*Forest Fire 75-76*)

In this, one can see the parallel differences between the two women. While Jeom-rye fell into this romance, Sa-wol has seen an opportunity and seeks to pursue it, actively seeking out Gyu-bok as a means to ease her own wounds and

sexual frustrations caused by the war. While Jeom-rye is seeking to regress to a pre-war past of love and tenderness, Sa-wol is ultimately aiming to transcend the war and reclaim what she too has lost by taking the reins of her own sexual agency.

Throughout *Forest Fire*, the women of the village make a number of references to men and to their own desires that *war* specifically has stolen from them. Not only the women, but Gyu-bok too references what he's missing in life and how his life is so much different than before.

In alluding to the conflicts of human being's raw desire in describing the wounds of a people divided through his portray of a Communist guerrilla escapee, Cha further adds to his propensity for humanism while also provoking tragedy. (Yu 1988, 533; author's own translation)

For the majority of the characters, this desire and the greater desire to love and be with loved ones is constantly under the surface and they disdain the war as a whole for taking it away from them. Through sex, these three characters are able to transcend the ideologies that rage over the Korean peninsula and break away from war for a brief moment. Despite this, their love is short-lived—it could not be a livable reality for Koreans at the time. In other words, though personal satisfaction is available for a moment, war's very nature of destruction will always prevail; this message is reiterated as the play reaches its finale with Cha emphasizing the temporality of love in times of war. Cha gives us this snippet of hope and romance in an otherwise horrifying situation, but in the end it all ends in tragedy because of the fact that Cha knows that war will always supersede humans regardless of which side you support.

Loss of a Nation and the Communicative Importance of Mise-en-scène—Understanding the Bamboo Grove

While the romantic melodrama surrounding Jeom-rye, Gyu-bok, and Sa-wol is an important factor of *Forest Fire*, the communicative ability of stage design is an often overlooked aspect of drama that is also successful at conveying an author's ideas and messages to an audience. As Hertel (2016, 50) highlights, “meaning depends on the spaces created through scenery, lighting, and the spatial

relations between individual actors as well as between actors and the spectators, on choreography of exits and entries, movements, and tableaux vivants, and on the relation between stage space and offstage space.” On the matter of set design, Pavis (1998, 353) adds that “it was long believed that the scenery should materialize the believable and ideal spatial coordinates of the text as the author envisages them when writing the play: stage design consisted in providing the spectator with the means of localizing and recognizing a universal neutral place (place, square) that was adaptable to any situation and able to situate mankind as abstract, eternal, and bereft of social roots.” Thus, there is an importance of mise-en-scène aesthetics and design in conveying meaning and how it can unify the puzzle pieces of drama and theatre that is often overlooked when analysing plays.

In *Forest Fire* there is only one set change throughout the performance. The bamboo grove is a prominent aspect of the play’s set design and the atmosphere of grove, an isolated area in the mountains surrounded by war, juxtaposes greatly with that of P village.¹⁴ The serenity of the bamboo grove plays a significant role in the unification of Cha’s narrative structure and his storytelling. As has been explored, at the opening of Act 3 Scene 2, the bamboo grove functions as an important place for a number of key characters; in short, the change in the set physically and metaphorically represents a place of refuge for the three characters, away from the village and from their troubles of the war-torn country and the destruction of ideological differences.

It can be said that Cha’s mise-en-scène gives clues to his all encompassing vision on the artistry and communicability of the set and his ideas on the world and the futility of war. From Cha’s stage directions provided at the beginning of each scene, only two clear locations are described in detail:

With mountains on all sides, the village seemingly appears to be warm; in fact the area forms a basin where snow gathers with severe cold. As the curtain rises, the sound of crows rings out from the mountains behind. The last trace of the setting sun far in the distance can be seen just disappearing.

14. The use of bamboo in the set has been constant throughout the running of the play since its first showing. In particular, the most recent production of *Forest Fire*, the *changgeuk* Korean operatic reinterpretation of the play running from October 25th to October 29th 2017 at the National Theater in Seoul directed by Lee Seong-yeol used bamboo extensively on stage, especially during key scenes focusing on the grove. Lee’s understanding of the way in which Cha saw the importance of the bamboo grove was particularly evident throughout the performance.

However the whole house has long been shrouded in the darkness and shadows of the mountain. (*Forest Fire* 12)

As is clear, Cha visualises P village as a cold, desolate place where darkness has befallen all those residing there for some time. This stage design focusing on Mrs. Yang and Mrs. Choe's homes as the focal point of the *mise-en-scène* remains constant throughout the majority of the play. However, in Act 3 Scene 2 the scene opens to a different setting—that of the bamboo grove. Gyu-bok and Jeom-rye are in the grove lovingly leaning against each other, presenting a different tone that juxtaposes greatly from the tense life of the village. Cha's stage notes describe the new stage design and mood:

In the bamboo grove there is a dug out area, just enough for one person to come in and sit down. The area is just barely covered by a roof made of straw and straw sacks. Fallen leaves have been heaped up into a mound so the dugout is easily missed and thick stalks of bamboo are so densely packed together that anything outside cannot be seen. (*Forest Fire* 66)

The symbolic nature of bamboo has been well established across all countries under the area of sinospheric influence. Considered one of the *Sagunja* (Four Noble Gentlemen) often depicted in classical East Asian art,¹⁵ the plant is symbolic of longevity and enduring resilience and durability (Kim 2008, 164). The long pervasive symbolism and personification of bamboo's nobility and resilience is played with by Cha in *Forest Fire* for dramatic effect as this new set's communicative abilities are explored with great depth and sensibility.

Though it is first introduced as a safe haven away from the terror of war, as the play reaches its finale, however, the bamboo grove takes on a much more robust thematic and symbolic importance in presenting Cha's ideas on the futility of war to his audience with its untimely torching in Act 5. The torching of the bamboo grove and the commotion surrounding its demise ultimately forms the tragic climax of *Forest Fire*. Cha takes the symbolic importance of bamboo and destroys the symbol of resilience, forcing the audience to wake up to the reality of war and the futility of ideological battles. The bamboo grove

15. The *Sagunja*, or *Siqūnzi* in Chinese, consist of the plum blossom, orchid, bamboo, and chrysanthemum. For more information on bamboo in classical texts, see Kim 2008.

goes from being an important set change of metaphorical resilience to being a vital clue that embodies Cha's message against war.

Mrs. Yang is informed of the burning down of the bamboo grove by the encroaching Southern soldiers in order clear out possible Communist guerrillas hiding in the area. The bamboo is not only a source of revenue, support, and food for her family and the village as a whole, but the grove is also a place of historic and sentimental importance, being passed down by her family for generations. The Southern army appears in the region, and informs Mrs. Yang how it needs to be burnt to clear out any possible guerrillas:

Soldier A: As all of you must know, in order to wipe out the communist guerrillas on a large scale, from now on we have to make sure they have nowhere to hide. Besides this, when we look down from the planes, only when we can see clearly can we...*(The crowd agrees, having seemingly understood what he really means.)*

Mrs. Yang: Even so, you must spare us the bamboo grove! You're telling me you're going to set fire to that grove right in front of my eyes, taken care of and passed down for generations... you'll have to kill me first!

Jeom-rye (*begging*): Just don't burn the bamboo grove. If we lose that, then we're all dead. Please save the grove if you intend on saving my family. *(Upon seeing Jeom-rye's heartfelt plea, everyone feels desperate.)*

Soldier A: We're following orders. You cannot sway the entire army with your personal circumstances! Move!

Mrs. Yang: Wait! Do you not perform rites for your ancestors in your home? Please, just think a while about our situation! This is our grove, even when my own son said he'd sell it off, I protested. Yet still you...

Mrs. Yang: Oh, God! Our family is ruined! Our home...*(Moving forward, she is stopped by those in front.) (A moment later, gunfire ensues, and smoke spreads and rises with the sound of bamboo igniting. Jeom-rye and Mrs. Yang step back without a word, like two women who have completely lost their minds. From here, a sense of emptiness prevails, rather than despair.)*

(Forest Fire 106-08)

Despite the unfolding of the war and the following destitution that has plagued the village for some time, the bamboo was a ubiquitous, ever present figure; it

was a provider of sustenance and but also hope due to its symbolic longevity persevering despite the hardships of war. As seen by the hysteria that unfolds, its destruction at the end of the play represents a physical and emotional loss to the villagers. Jeom-rye acts frantically, begging the soldier to spare that bamboo grove, saying its destruction would cause their deaths.

The bamboo grove's first appearance in Act 3 Scene 2 juxtaposes with the bleakness of the crumbling remains of the village, and represented a place of pre-war security and love for Gyu-bok, Jeom-rye, and Sa-wol. From Act 5, after the play has reached its dramatic peak, Cha subverts this traditional symbolism of the plant and uses the bamboo field to explore the theme of loss, not only for the characters of the village but also on a more universal level, the audience. This is due to the fact that the bamboo grove transcends the importance of simply economic security. The burning of the bamboo by Nationalists in an attempt to kill Gyu-bok, an ordinary man caught up in the Communist draft, above all else symbolises a violent attack on *Koreanness* in itself. Cha uses this as the final and most poignant dramatic device to display to the audience his disdain for war as a whole. The Koreanness at threat manifests itself as something innate, pertaining to the soil itself that existed long before war and ideological differences. As we can see from the above extract, the field is quite literally and spiritually the embodiment of Mrs. Yang's ancestors and existed long before the war. Despite pleading with the soldier, he is completely ambivalent to her call of desperation. In this, Cha demonstrates the dangers of detachment from the past that is associated with war and ideological conflict.

This ambivalence is a symptom of the ideological division of the Korean peninsula. War can also destroy *cultural memory*, severing one from their past. As Gill (2010, 64) states, "war destroys culture as well as bodies, bridges, and buildings that it encounters. Rooted in this destruction lies war's final promise to the individual: its pledge for social reorganization." Parcak (2010, 168) adds that "at the end of a war or conflict, if a group's culture is still intact, then that group can rebuild. If war destroys a group's past and related cultural memory, even in part, then the loss is often felt across the globe." This is ultimately the question that Cha is addressing to his audience. Both Mrs. Yang and the soldier have the same history and traditions, but the war has severed the soldier from his past as he coldly states how she "cannot sway the entire army" just because of her needs. The ideological conflict has made him unsympathetic to his own pre-war cultural heritage. In other words, ideology has replaced and erased

culture, allowing him to cruelly destroy the bamboo grove even knowing that its destruction will mean death to the villagers. The whole event is futile and represents an act of chauvinistic nationalism—the act of catching one escapee is worth more to them than the life of a whole village. The field is also Mrs. Yang's ancestral land, thus this act can be read as a double-cross against the nation; the act of burning the field severs the new from the old. Cha is warning against this in future; sometimes these fights are so futile, as it blinds one from seeing the damage they are committing and the act actually causes more harm than good. In this, Cha raises and presents new questions on the nature of future Korean conflict to his audience while also playing with the use of set and the greater *mise-en-scène* in conveying meaning to the public.

At the time of the play's first run, Korea was still trying to come to terms with the meaning of division. The communicative abilities of the set may well be overlooked, but Cha shifts the audiences' expectations, compelling them to look closer at the society in which they operate *through* the play. The change of set sets up for a tragic climax of destruction of the nation with no winners. In destroying the bamboo field and stripping Mrs. Yang of her ancestral past and the villagers' last lifeline, one has to argue that Cha is attempting to make a statement that division has destroyed Korean culture beyond repair and that future war will bring nothing but negativity to all. Though individuals such as Mrs. Yang have clearly lost a lot, even the soldiers have gained nothing in burning the grove—through their actions, they severed themselves from their pasts, something that they will never reconnect with again.

Conclusion

To conclude, Korea's most prominent realist playwright, Cha Beom-seok's *Forest Fire* and his greater career has at times been interpreted as "anti-communist." This work has examined the ways in which Cha actually demonstrates a more general anti-war stance in both his work and personal commentary, challenging the standpoints of a number of academics. *Forest Fire* is a play of dualities, with messages and criticisms on ideology and the war. Interpretations of Jeong and Hong see a critique of communism as the play's central message. Although this work accepts that communism comes under critique by Cha throughout the play, one must delve further and ask greater questions about the war itself and

its effect on citizens of a nation divided while also examining Cha's life and his comments on the war.

As has been examined, a key characteristic of literature of this period was anti-communist themes but this was at the behest of governing bodies to convey this idea to the masses. Although one cannot deny this work can be interpreted in such a way when reading or watching *Forest Fire* as a product of an era that actively criticised communism and the North alongside other works of Cha, I also believe that a work should be examined as a standalone, separate from the era to explore the thematic elements at the work's centre. Due to a greater interest in anti-communism in Cha's work as a whole, I see that *Forest Fire* has been somewhat rashly dragged into that analysis.

As has been also examined, Cha explores the relationship between love and the negative effects of war on human beings trying to regress to a past of happier days. Even when it seems like love can prevail, the war puts an end to it and all individuals have lost someone they love or are deprived of love due to both sides of the ideological spectrum. Cha also presents the poisonous nature of ideological conflict on simple rural communities caught in the middle. The war poisons once happy communities against one another, and suspicion and accusations tear apart alliances over ideological differences that people may or may not even support. Finally, regardless of what side you are on, both sides of the ideological conflict, whether it is taking food from starving villagers or burning away ancestral land, deal irreversible damage to the soul of a nation that cannot be repaired.

Cha was a man who saw the damages of the war for what it was, and sought to communicate the conflict's many failings to his audience with the visceral realism that he was so well known for. The Korean War technically continues until this day and *Forest Fire* can be interpreted as Cha Beom-seok's warning against the futility of war and the way in which it achieves nothing but destruction for all Koreans regardless of their political affiliations.

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Abstract

Realist playwright Cha Beom-seok's name is synonymous with the Korean stage. Despite a significant body of work, his 1962 play *Forest Fire* has attracted the most attention achieving both critical and commercial acclaim during the socio-economically difficult time that was post-war South Korea. Academic work on Cha's writing naturally focuses on the realist elements of his plays, although a number of studies focus on thematic elements of anti-communism across his plays due to the trend of nationalistic writing that stressed anti-communist rhetoric in the post-war years. Despite this interpretation, there is also a significant amount of evidence that points towards a more balanced, anti-war stance especially relating to *Forest Fire*. This work explores a number of ways in which Cha presents anti-war views rather than attacking a particular ideology, such as his exploration of distrust and suspicion as a symptom of ideological conflict on village dynamics, war's destructive effects on human beings abilities of feel love and sexual fulfillment, and also the way in which the stage and set design can be used to convey his views on the effects that the war had on Koreanness.

Keywords: Cha Beom-seok, *Forest Fire*, *Sanbul*, realism, Korean War, Korean theatre, anti-war.

