Manhae Han Yong-un in Modern Korean History: A Determined Pioneer

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1. Diehard Spirit of Resistance

Born in Hongseong, Ch'ungch'ong-do at the end of the nineteenth-century when Korea was colonized by Japan, Manhae Han Yong-un dedicated his life to resisting the Japanese imperial government and to the liberation of the Korean People until his death in 1944. During this time, imperialist Japan tried hard to strengthen its colonial rule in an attempt to win the losing war it had waged in order to carry out its avid imperialist enterprise. As a result, Japan planned to annex the Korean peninsula permanently and put the Korean people under slavery, oppressing whatever ran against this colonial policy. It was at this stage of Japanese Imperialism that Manhae made his determined and dauntless resistance to Japanese Imperialism, fighting to set his people free. His efforts were not restricted to one or two specific areas of society but spread out so widely through the political, economical, cultural, religious, and literary spheres that his presence cannot but be felt in understanding the Korean history of that time. Thus, Manhae can be safely said to have represented the diehard spirit in Modern Korean History.

2. Three Strands of Thought and Manhae’s Influence on Buddhism

Manhae’s diehard spirit of resistance came from three different but not unrelated

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strands of thought. Thought is the spirit that enables us to live out our time and situation. Usually, it is built in two ways. One is by reading books and reflecting on them, and the other is by encountering the real world. We build our thought by learning either from books or from life. Manhae's thought was also built in these two ways. More specifically, we can distinguish three strands that formed and constructed his thought: religious commitment to Buddhism, especially [Vijñaptimātra (Mind only philosophy)], political practice against Japan, and literary creation novels, modern verse and shijo.

Yet Manhae's uniqueness lies in the unprecedented excellence of his practice in these three different regions. In the realm of literature, he wrote great works, culminating in My Lover's Silence. What is amazing is that he produced these outstanding literary works without having any formal education through which he could have trained himself in composition in Korean. After having been educated in Chinese letters and literature in childhood, he was never exposed to written Korean because he left his family in order to experience and know the world, and then committed himself to Buddhism and spent his life, since first understanding the mystery of Tao, in contemplating the Emptiness and Nothingness beyond the phenomenal world.

Also in his Nationalist political practice, his accomplishment is outstanding. According to the chronology of his life, he started his anti-Japanese Nationalist career in 1896 when he enlisted in the Tonghak resistance army as a volunteer at the age of 17.1 He continued his career as a fighter for the liberation of the people throughout his life in the Korean peninsula, except for two years while he was an exile in Vladivostok and Manchuria. The single-mindedness of his nationalist practice never blinked, shrank or evaporated even in the face of the notorious violence and cruelty of the Japanese imperial government. Manhae did not belong to the group of fighters whom the Japanese forced to abandon their political opposition or who died in prison. He was one the few anti-Japanese fighters who survived the Japanese oppression.

In the religious sphere, Manhae's legacy is much richer and ampler. Although it is undeniable that Korean Buddhism had built a great tradition, reaching a high level of spirituality, it is also true that it showed the inveterate inertia and lethargy which tend to accompany such an old and long religious tradition. It was one of the most urgent tasks of Buddhism in Manhae's time to throw off the shackles of tradition. A no less urgent task was to preserve the identity of Korean Buddhism.

1 Manhae Han Yong-un Sŏnsaeng Nyŏnbo, Nara Sarang (2), 1971, pp 14–15
itself; for, imperialist Japan was attempting to abolish Korean Buddhism as part of its plan to impoverish and eradicate the national spirit of the Korean people in order to manage and govern the country as its colony subjected to its rule once and for all. Manhae undertook these two tasks of rejuvenating Korean Buddhism and of preserving its identity.

Manhae’s attempt to renew Korean Buddhism first articulated itself in 1909. He committed himself to Buddhism in 1905, a few years after he had taken shelter at Ose-am, Mt. Sŏlak. After attacking Hongju Hobang as a member of the Tonghak movement, he pursued resistance to Japanese imperialism until he had to take refuge at Ose-am to evade the eyes of the Japanese police. Considering that he began to renew Buddhism only five years or so after he became a Buddhist, it must be pointed out that his grasp of Buddhism was remarkably quick and rapid.

If Manhae’s understanding of Buddhism was quick, it was also to the point; for, his attempt to renew Korean Buddhism was concentrated on inserting it into social reality by reestablishing it as spiritual guide to the world. He wanted to see Buddhism alive in history and in humanity. A good example of this attempt is Pulgyo Yushinron (A Thesis on Renewing Buddhism), drafted in 1910 and published in 1913 by the Buddhist Publishing Company. In the preface, Manhae expressed his purpose of writing the book in this way: “I had always kept confidence in my heart in the possibility of rejuvenating our Buddhism. I just could not put my thought into practice due to the situation which did not allow it. In this book, I wanted to appease my feeling of frustration by apprehending with words a transcendental world of Buddhism.”  

In this book which consists of 17 chapters including Preface, Introduction and discussions of such topics as the basic nature of Buddhism and the ideas of Buddhism, Manhae expressed his view of the ways of leading people to the realm of freedom.

Here Manhae very strongly argued for the necessity of reestablishing the ideas and philosophy of Buddhism. He insisted that the ultimate goal of Buddhism lay in awakening human beings from blind sleep by teaching them Great Wisdom and Great Mind. Importantly, he went on to declare that Buddhism did not exist for the purpose of meditative reading and reflection in the mountain:

In Korea, the so-called Buddhist invocation is no less a longing for Buddha than a call for Him. How would it be possible that Amitabha exists only in the Land of Perfect Bliss? In that case, the Land is too far from us because it is written that the Land is located in the West across ten billion countries.  

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2 Han Yong-un Chŏngp', Shin'gu Munhwasa, 1973, p.33
What happens when the Temple lies in the mountains? First of all, progressive thought will disappear. ... Then adventurous thought will vanish ... Next liberatory thought will evaporate. ... And then resistant thought will cease to exist. ... Located in the secluded mountain, the Temple does not recognize the upheavals of the world. As a result, although anti-religious sounds of drums and trumpets disturb and erupt the earth, Buddhism never wages war against them. Nor does it console the defeated warriors. Despite the forceful banners in the Buddhist castle, it is so helpless and powerless that it cannot raise a flag of resistance.\(^4\)

As is expressed in the passages quoted above, Manhae had a determined and even radical attitude toward the renewal of Buddhism. However, his radicalism results from a firm belief in Buddhist principles. It is true that he expressed doubts about some of the Buddhist principles in other places in the same book, which may lead some readers to the view that Manhae’s radicalism came from his disbelief in Buddhism itself. Yet his belief in Buddhism was stronger than any one else’s in his time. The following observation made in 1924 during an interview is an example that proves Manhae’s firm belief in Buddhism: “I believe in Buddhism. I believe in Buddhism single-mindedly.”\(^5\) He added to this straightforward avowal three reasons for his belief. First, Buddhism argues for equality. Second, Buddhism is based on self-belief. Third, Buddhism transcends the dichotomy of Matter and Spirit. Because his theory of the renovation of Buddhism depended on the concepts of equality and self-belief, it is clear that his attempt to renew Buddhism was a corollary to his firm belief in Buddhism itself.

Manhae’s resistance to imperialist Japan through Buddhism articulated itself mostly in organizational activities. The best examples are the Songgwang Temple Uprising in 1911 and the organization of Mandang in the early 1930’s. The Songgwang Temple Uprising was organized to frustrate imperialist Japan’s attempt to abolish Korean Buddhism. In March, 1908, Yi Hoe-gwang, the head priest of Hae’in temple gathered near Tongdaemun 52 chief priests from around the country. The pretended purpose of this gathering was to launch an Order for the propagation and teaching of Buddhism. Yet the real purpose was to annex Korean Buddhism to Chodongjong of Japanese Buddhism. Underlying this attempt was imperial Japan’s plan to use religion in governing the Korean people. At this time, Manhae was not in the country, but, since the beginning of Japanese colonial rule, had been going

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3 Ibid p 56
4 Ibid pp 64–68
5 Buddhism that I believe, knemyŏk, 1924, 3 pp 32–33
around Manchuria and Vladivostok working in foreign lands for the liberation of
the country. “A Story of Survival,” and “Through Siberia to Seoul,” are works that
deal with his experience during this period. Manhae returned to his home country
in 1911. It was not long before he made a determined move to frustrate the scheme
of Yi Hoe-gwang and his associates. He put together such colleagues as Pak Han
Yong, Chin Chin-ung, Kim Chong-rae, and Chang Kum-bong, and held an assembly
of priests at Songgwang temple. In this meeting, the eternal tradition of Korean
Buddhism was proclaimed, and Yi Hoe-gwang was excommunicated, who had tried
to put an end to the tradition by subjecting it to Japanese Buddhism. This meeting
also transferred the rule of Imjejong initiated by Yi Hoe-gwang to Kim Kyong-un at
Soom temple and to Manhae. After this uprising, the following year’s Uprising at
Pomô temple eventually frustrated imperial Japan’s intention to abolish Korean
Buddhism. 

Manhae’s determined resistance to imperialist Japan through Buddhism never
stopped. He developed the movement of young Buddhists which contributed to the
Songgwang Temple Uprising, forming the Association of Young Buddhists, which
ushered in the Association for the Renovation of Buddhism. Yet it is Mandang
which best represented Manhae’s organizational efforts. Mandang was a Buddhism-
based resistance organization for the liberation of the people, the practical leader of
which was Manhae himself. As such, it sheds light on the nature of other
associations organized by Manhae. Also, these organizational efforts illuminate his
religious thought. It was not restricted to the level of ideas, concerned with the
abstract salvation of the people and spiritual guidance of them into the Land of
Happiness. Combined with nationalism, his religious thought was defined by its
practical nature, which emphasized the material reality of the people and the
country.

However, Manhae’s influence on Korean Buddhism was not limited to the
practical organizational resistance to Japan’s imperialist rule but involved an in-
depth study of the religious principles of Buddhism. He wrote innumerable essays
on Buddhism, including “A Theory of the Renovation of Buddhism,” which
contained a strong will to renew Buddhism. He published many books, such as
“Pulgyo Taejong,” “Yumahil Soxigyong Kang ‘il,” and “Shiphyondam Chuhae,” and
left many historical writings on temples like “Könbongsat Kay Könbongsat malsa

6. Han Yong-un Chöngup (1)
7 In Kwon-hwan, Pak No-jun, Han Yong-un Yon’gu, T’ongmungwan, 1966, pp 71–72
8 Ibid pp 373–375
Sajôk.” Among these great works, “Pulgyo Taejôn,” must be counted as the greatest achievement. Manhae wrote this book in the early 1940’s while he stayed at Pörmö temple, South Kyôngsang province. In this book, he sorted out the main arguments of 440 Buddhist books and arranged them in order to create a reference book. In doing so, he rewrote in easy Korean difficult Buddhist books written in Chinese, producing an invaluable book which taught Buddhist principles to the people.9

Besides writing important Buddhist tracts and books, Manhae published Buddhist journals. In his early career he edited a monthly journal, Yushim, which was based on Buddhist philosophy, and in 1930 he took over and published Pulgyo, which was under suspension. Yushim was first published in 1918. Although it ceased to exist after the third issue, the significance of its presence at a time when there was hardly a monthly journal in the country cannot be overlooked. The publication of Pulgyo, therefore, was no small matter. Manhae expressed his intention to continue to publish Pulgyo in the preface of the first issue published on 1 March, 1937. He intended the journal to lay a groundwork for opening up a new horizon of Korean Buddhism by putting together all the temples, more than 900, around the country.10 These publications alone prove the great extent of Manhae’s impact on modern Korean Buddhism.

3. The Torch-Light of the Nationalist Movement Opposing Imperialism

As we have already mentioned, the period in which Manhae threw himself into the tide of the nationalist movement dates from his experience as a rebel soldier in the battle in Hongju during the Tonghak Revolution. Manhae’s nationalist movement against imperialism that began this way continued without a single break all through the strong military oppressions of the 1910s, the ’20s, the ’30s and through the entire Japanese occupation. For the same reason that he praised Wein Chung Inho’s verse—“Could even the wind-stricken orchid’s bitter balm match your strong devotion?”—his own undaunted spirit and uncompromising poignancy served as the brightest torch illuminating the history of anti-Japanese struggle. His contribution to the movement can be broadly divided into three stages.

The First Stage runs from his participation in the Hongju battle in 1896 to the end of 1918. The Second Stage runs from the beginning of the 1919 Kimi Mansei

9. Ibid pp 105–107
10 Pulgyo-ôi Sokkan-e daehayô, Han Yong-un Chônyp (2), p 232.
Uprising, when he was imprisoned as a nationalist leader, through his active role in organizing Shinganhoe after his release and in supporting the Kwangju Student Uprising. The Third Stage runs from the 1930s, when he tried various means of nationalist struggle resisting the more atrocious Japanese repression of the period.

In the first period, Manhae's activities can be divided into those activities pertaining to the more direct armed resistance and cultural activities. His experience at the Hongju battle obviously belongs to the former. Later, when the Japanese usurped the national sovereignty, Manhae crossed the border and wandered around Yonhaeju and Manchuria. Particularly in Manchuria, he visited the camp of Tongnipgun regiment that was preparing for an armed assault on the homeland. It was a drill camp located at Soyaha Hoeinhyŏn.¹¹ There he extolled the merits of the Tongnipgun. But he also chided them mercilessly for their shortcomings, at which, as the story goes, an irate soldier fired his rifle at him, scoring four good shots. The anecdote uniquely illustrates Manhae's strong will-power: even as he bled from the bullet wound, he did not flinch from eloquently voicing his self-assured criticism. When a doctor arrived to anaesthetize him for the operation, he flatly declined it, saying, "Only ugly men ask for such thing!" Thus despising the pain-relieving measure, he nonchalantly endured the bloody bone-scratching ordeal, we are told.¹²

After returning to the Korean peninsula, Manhae's resistance struggle expressed itself in the form of militant opposition, led by Songwang temple, to the Japanese' persecution of religions. He then travelled around the southern provinces, visiting various temples and villages, to enlighten and educate them. His preachings generally included messages urging the recovery of national rights. One conjectures that it was also during this period that he began his periodical Yushim and prepared for the production of the so-called New Poetry embodied in My Lover's Silence. During his early cultural activities, however, there are some shady aspects in his understanding of history. A case in point would be his attitude towards the question of the Buddhist monk's obligatory celibacy. He thought that the Buddhist injunction against monks' marriage was a dated doctrine. As far as he was concerned, Buddhism was a religion distinguished by its flexible and generous dogma. For the propagation and strengthening of such religion, he maintained, monks had every reason to get married and bring up their own children.¹³ In a sense, the life of a religion depends on increasing its believers. And one certainly needs those devoted

¹¹ In Kwon-hwan, Pak No-jun, op. cit, p 306.
¹² Ch'ŏng Kwang-ho, Munjkŏk Chisa-ro pon Manhae, Narasarang (2), p 60
to propagating its beliefs Manhāe’s argument against the doctrine of enforced celibacy was thus not entirely illogical. The problem was the method he chose to settle this question, which was to petition the Chungch’uwon and the T’onggam, Sanaejon’gilli, to support his cause.¹⁴

Needless to say, Tongambu or Jungchuwon served as the headquarters for Japanese rule in Korea. That Manhāe ignored such a fact and appealed to their help to resolve what was essentially a Buddhist problem cannot therefore be entirely acceptable. For this reason, there have been numerous criticisms of this measure on Manhāe’s part.¹⁵ One has to point out, in relation to this case, the limitations in his understanding of world politics. As we have seen, it was during the last days of the Taehan Empire that he devoted himself to a life of religious service as a Buddhist monk to redeem the people. At that time, Korean society was faced with two urgent problems. First, there was the need to secure national independence by stopping the takeover of the peninsula by imperialist forces led by Japan. Second, there was the equally crucial demand for modernizing Korean society which still had to jettison the burdens of its feudal heritage. These two tasks of the anti-imperialist and anti-feudal movements were imposed on Korea. Without breaking the encroaching power of imperialism, however, the latter could not be achieved, while without an effective reform of anachronistic elements, one could not fend off the imperialist aggression. Seen in this light, we find that Manhāe’s nationalist struggle was ambiguous about one important aspect; he was not completely aware of the complex structure facing anti-imperialist and anti-feudal movements.

As Manhāe enters the second stage, his nationalist struggle against imperialism changes its tenor. During this period the March 1 Movement took place, when the entire nation stood up to proclaim independence. Not only did Manhāe join the ringleaders of the uprising as a representative of the nation, but he was also one of the thirty-three members who read the “Declaration of Independence” at Myongwolkwan. In fact, he co-drafted the “Declaration” with Yukdang. His distinct voice can be heard, particularly, in the “Three Resolutions” appended to the main text drafted by Yukdang. In retrospect, Yukdang’s “Declaration” is marked by its robust tone and sturdy fluency. Yet at the same time, one feels an excess of rhetoric marring some parts. Supplementing this text, Manhāe added the “Three Resolutions.” It was there that the slogan providing the guideline for action, “Let us openly state our views to the very last man,” was stipulated.

¹⁴ Ibid, pp 88–89
¹⁵ Yŏn Mu-ung, Manhāe Han Yong-un-ro, Han Yong-un Ch’ŏnjiip (4), pp 394–395.
Manhae's behavior on the day of the Declaration was more dauntless and admirable than anyone else's. His speech that followed the Declaration was a moving appeal to those present to conduct themselves with pride and dignity as leaders representing the nation. Even when he was jailed by the Japanese police who arrested him at the meeting, he set the model for those taking part in the independence movement. He practised to the letter the three principles of struggle, namely, not to employ lawyers to defend oneself against the Japanese robber-gang, not to eat privately supplied food, and not to accept release on bail. As the rumor spread that the Japanese were going to severely torture them at the prison, some national leaders wailed aloud over their blighted fate. This was something Manhae simply could not countenance. "Good heavens!" he shouted, "are you one of those who put down your signature as a representative of the people? If that's what you're worth, cross out your name, now!" With these words, the story goes, he took up the toilet jar in the cell and smeared the face of the coward with its contents.16

Manhae was also different from others at the court, where he never ceased to sternly argue for the rationality of Korea's independence. He finally brought the Japanese persecutors to admit their injustice: "Your theory is no doubt correct, but I can't help it because it is the official policy of my government." The text that best epitomizes Manhae's militant spirit of anti-imperialist struggle during this period is the one we have under the title of "The Reason for Korea's Independence." This treatise, which was written in his prison cell, was secretly smuggled out to the Temporary Korean Government in Shanghai. Thus, the text was published in the November 4th issue of the Tongnipshinmun, the organ of the Temporary Korean Government in Shanghai.17 One sees in this work the author's genuine conviction, based on his particular history of philosophy, of the inevitability of Korea's national independence.

In "The Reason for Korea's Independence," Manhae put forth his view that human history progresses towards liberty and equality through the struggle against barbarism and oppression. Japanese colonial rule was clearly going against this tide. He also made it clear that Japanese rule was essentially an expression of barbarous regression resorting to brutal military violence.18 The same violent force that Japan was using for its colonialisit purposes, he warned, would rebound on the users to destroy them. On the other hand, Korea's independence was fully in tune with the

16 Ch'ong Kwang-ho, Ibid pp 63–64
17 An Pyong-yik, Manhae Han Yong-un-in Tongnip Sasang, Han Yong-un Ch'onjip (4), p. 376
18 Han Yong-un Ch'onjip (1), p. 358
forces of history's progress. But the Japanese hardly heeded Manhae's warning as they invaded first Manchuria and then the mainland of China. Later they spread their blood-stained hand to the Pacific Ocean, which finally led to their devastating destruction. All this was predicted with lucid logic by Manhae in his prison. This fact alone should amply attest to Manhae's progressive and dynamic mind.

His activities in the March 1 Movement gave Manhae a three-year prison term, which was one of the heaviest sentences passed on the Movement leaders. This can be seen as a recognition of the importance of Manhae as a nationalist leader. Those leaders who had finished their prison terms often led a secluded life of retirement or collaborated with the colonial government. Unlike such people, Manhae relentlessly carried on his cause in lecture tours, where he vigorously agitated for anti-Japanese resistance. Moreover, there was not a single nationalist or anti-imperialist organization that he was not involved in. The most representative case would be the role he played in forming and activating the Shinganhoe.

Shin'ganhoe was a unified nationalist movement founded in 1927 encompassing both the Left and the Right. Other founders of this organization besides Manhae include An Jaehong, Kim Byongno, Cho Pyŏng-ok, Hong Myŏng-hŭn, and Hŏ Hŏn. Manhae was not only instrumental in forming the alliance itself but was active as a member of the central committee, as well as the head of its Seoul branch. Shin'ganhoe grew into a national organization with 200 regional branches in less than a year. It served as a solid framework of the nationalist movement.19 Manhae's position concerning the organization was clear: it had to remain nationally unified. The Left was hoping to use Shinganhoe as a popular front serving their cause. When such an objective seemed less likely to be realized, they demanded dissolution of the organization. Manhae was adamant on this issue. He flatly pointed out, "Those who admit the necessity of cooperation should not even pronounce the word 'dissolution'" 20 This appears to be a logical conclusion derived from his idea that the anti-Japanese struggle could only succeed if the Left and the Right were united.

Manhae, moreover, attempted along with Jo Byongok to support the Kwangju student uprising by organizing a mass rally. This was thwarted at the outset by the Japanese police who detected their designs. Meanwhile, the objective conditions had become less encouraging during the 1930s, when Japan began its attack on the continent, as a step towards spreading its military campaign to the entire world. In preparation for such movement, they were going to eradicate resistance movements

19 In Kwon-hwan, Pak No-jun, Ibid pp. 361-362
20 Shin'ganhoe Haeso Undong, Samch'ŏn, 1930 2, p 63.
in Korea. All of this, however, did little to curb Manhae’s incessant struggles against oppression and persecution. The evidence of his vigorous activities can be found both in his journalistic writings and his life records. As is well known, he was involved with the Mandala Party, which was an underground resistance organization of Buddhist monks. Notwithstanding the fierce surveillance network of the Japanese, he carried on his untiring mission to help other patriots. One fine example is the funeral ceremony he organized honoring the death of Ilsong Kim Dongsam, who passed away at the Seodaemun Prison where he was held in custody. At the news of Kim’s death, Manhae ran to the Prison and, making little of the Japanese’ intimidations performed funeral rites for Kim.21

During the 1930s, moreover, Manhae never stopped trying to revive the nation’s spirit with his pen. “Expectations and Hopes Regarding Our Peasantry,” “New Year’s Observations on the Peasant Movement,” and “The Sufferings of Our Peasants,” all written in the ‘30s, can be counted among the material specimens of his political efforts along with “The Land to Which Choson People Will Emigrate”, written in 1932, and “Co-Education of Koreans and Japanese”.22 Of particular interest are the last two texts. In the “The Land to Which Choson People Will Emigrate,” he proclaimed his position regarding those uprooted peasants drifting to foreign lands: “I wish to cry out a single definitive word on this issue. Let us not leave this land. Yet I fear this may not go well with the bleak actuality.” “Co-Education of Koreans and Japanese”, on the other hand, was written as a rebuttal of the Japanese’ educational policy designed to suppress Korean national awareness. His adamant opposition to the official argument was clearly expressed in these words:

Although I know not what gave rise to the co-education problem, it occurs to me that a truly undiscriminating education should mean giving Koreans a properly Korean education and the Japanese a properly Japanese education. Whether in terms of pedagogic theory or of culture, custom, and other less theoretical considerations, a co-education at secondary level appears nothing less than impossible. To extend it to the primary level, needless to say, is quite out of the question 23

In the Japanese plan to promote a co-education of the two national groups was concealed a most cunning design. During that time, they had already attempted to exclude Korean language and writing from the school curriculum. Korean history

21 Manhae Han Yong-un Sŏn'naeng Hae'gi, Narasarang (2), p. 20
22 Han Yong-un Chŏngyp (1), p 385
23. Ibid, p 388
and geography were also put on the black list. Co-education was meant to facilitate this process effectively. Manhae quickly detected this hidden purpose, which he opposed to its face. His criticism amounted to a total challenge of the colonialist education strategy that was a major component of the Japanese colonial government policy.

As the 1930s faded away to the '40s, Japanese oppression increased conspicuously. They were dragging Korean men and women to their battle fronts as cannon fodder. Korean language was forbidden even in daily lives, as Japanese was enforced as the sole medium of linguistic communication. Koreans had to begin and end their days with a recital of the "Imperial Subject’s Vow" swearing allegiance to the Japanese Emperor. At each Japanese national holiday, Korean families had to put up the Japanese flag. Quite literally, the circumstances were such that, as one poet put it, there was "not one plot of earth to make a flower blossom / not one plot of earth for the young deer to gambol." Yet again, Manhae’s nationalist spirit was hardly affected by this leaping acceleration of the Japanese' armed oppression. He supremely neglected the repeated pressure put on him to speak in mass meetings supporting Japan’s war mobilization drives. Rather than change his name into Japanese, he declined to register his name. Not once did he allow a Japanese flag to be put up in his residence. Putting his name in the family register for him meant recognizing the colonial rule. Thus he went through every kind of inconvenience as an unregistered person all his life. The colonial policy of identifying the Koreans with the Japanese, again, could hardly meet with his compliance. This anecdote from 1943, one year before his death, is a telling incident.

On April 29, the Ch’ŏnjangjul celebrating the Emperor’s birthday, a county-office clerk visited Manhae at Shumwoojang.

"Sir, you will have to come to Chosŏn Shinto Palace today."
"I won’t."
"But why?"
"I won’t go because I won’t."
"On what authority do you refuse to go?"
"On what authority? Well, on what authority did the Japanese take over my country?"

The clerk was at a loss for answer.
"Couldn’t you at least put up the flag?"
"I won’t do that either. I don’t have any Jap flag, to begin with...."

24 Ch’oe Pŏn-sul, Manhae Nyŏnbo, Han Yong-an Chŏnhyŏp (1), p. 390!
Put in the perspective of the political situation of the times, such behavior on Manhae’s part appears truly courageous. In that period, the Japanese were extorting every Korean leader’s support for their predatory war efforts. Ch’unwon and Yukdang, as a result, failed to decline enforced lecture tours encouraging Korean students to enlist in the Japanese army. In anti-air raid drills, such eminent leaders as Yō Un-hyōng, Song Chin-u, An Chae-hong were brought to the podium. Manhae, however, refused all of this, never flinching from using blatantly anti-Japanese expressions. One has to say that his is a rare case of a nationalist leader who did not stoop to the enemy in the dark final years of Japanese colonial rule. For this reason, we have to conclude that his torch was the brightest and the most valuable one of all.

4. His Activities Promoting National Literature

Manhae Han Yong-un’s prominent achievements can be found in literature. A combination of literary career with political and cultural activism is not particularly exceptional among his contemporary nationalist leaders. Tanjae Shin Ch’ae-ho will be a clear example. As is widely recognized, Tanjae was the one with the acutest nationalist spirit of all the major leaders in exile. He is also the author of many New Poems, as well as numerous verses written in classical Chinese. But even with full regard given to his thoughts and intentions, one cannot say that Tanjae’s poetry has high literary quality. Manhae’s works are completely different. He clearly has explored a new field that allows no easy competition.

If one looks at his collected writings, one can see that Manhae’s literary productions encompassed verse works, including Korean poetry and poetry in classical Chinese, and prose pieces, including short stories, novels, and essays. His prose fiction includes two full-length novels, “Black Wind” and “A Weak Dawn,” and one novella entitled “Death.” There is another incomplete novel that was serialized in Chosôn chung’ang ilbo under the title of “Regret,” as well as the “Iron-blooded Beauty,” which can be classified as New Novel. The former, however, was not finished into a coherent work, while the latter’s questionable quality should keep us from classifying it as a full-fledged novel. This leaves the “Black Wind” and “Death” as two noteworthy pieces.

More specifically, the “Black Wind” is a symbolic work from its title on. Black here stands for anarchism advocating violent means for transforming society. The

25 Ch’oe Kwan-ho, Manhae-ga namgun Ilhwa, Han Yong-un Chônyip (I), p 378.
background of the story is China during the latter years of Ch'öng dynasty. Its plot involves a love affair between two young revolutionaries. "Death" is a posthumously discovered work that was not published during the colonial period. Its contents reveal aspects promoting anti-Japanese resistance. For such reason, these two can be regarded as works containing Manhae's historical awareness and nationalist spirit. One has reservations, however, in listing them among his finest works. It was in the mid-1930s that Manhae wrote or published these works. This was the period that saw such landmarks in the history of modern Korean novel as Pak T'ae-won's *Creekside Scenes* and Ch'ae Man-shik's *Troubled Stream*, compared to which "Black Wind" and "Death" do not have great significance.\(^{26}\)

One could say similar things about Manhae's essays and other miscellaneous prose including *Essays from Shimwujang*. In these works, Manhae was more interested in expressing his ideas and conveying his meaning. Generally, one can say that a fine essay is marked by sharp turns of expressions that accompany brilliant ideas. But Manhae's writings in this category failed to discard the heavy Chinese style that obviously accompanies no fresh thoughts. They clearly would not join the first row of representative essays in the modern Korean literary canon.

But his poetry offers works of a completely different caliber. After three years in prison, Manhae directly went back to the forefront of the political-social movement. Between his hectic lecture and teaching schedules, Manhae appears to have constantly jotted down verse. Thus in 1926, he published "My Lover's Silence," which consisted mostly of those pieces not published in journals. Furthermore, after that work, he kept on writing poetry, such as one Shijo entitled "Shimujang Sanshi" and numerous poems in Chinese letters including "Ch'ing Yongho-hwasang Sulaesanggyön". To speak of "Shimujang Sanshi" here, one has to stress its allegorical aspect:

You mountain stream,
Where were you born and where are you going?
Wherefore are you so busy flowing?
Once gone, would you ever come back or not?

Without a word the water runs
Through the endlessly entangled arrowroot vines,
The short dike it tumbles over,
The tall bank it bypasses
Gently gently its steady little voice

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Resonates through the green hill
As it echoes between the rocks on each side.

So thus it succeeds in reaching from the mountains
To the sea!
Of course, the water hardly is conscious,
Yet I, a mere mortal in the crowd,
I hear such sermons from it

“Mountain Stream” (full text)

The stream here is addressed as a reflection of the speaker’s mind. Yet his consciousness is not tuned to the great principle of life under the imperialist regime, namely national self-consciousness. Moreover, one cannot easily find here those virtues normally accorded to lyrical pieces. Unlike narrative verse, lyrics are predicated on the speaker’s intimate inner mind or emotion. For this reason, it must encompass within itself certain public grounds for bringing in and securing the reader. A lyric must ensure that rapport through its diction, style, and form. And what often opens the way is the technique of using words from a novel angle. Yet we have trouble tracing such elements in Manhae’s “Shimwujang Sanshi” represented by the above piece. This fact prevents us from praising the work as great literature.

Manhae’s Sijo, as the following specimens show, deserve a similar verdict:

When the sound of autumn rain wakes me up I realize it was a mere dream.
No trace I find of my lover having visited; only the dim lamplight has grown dimmer
Wish as I may to dream that dream again, I cannot bring myself to go back to sleep.

First stanza of “Autumn Night Dream”

To beguile the long autumn night, I thought we would pour forth our hearts,
Yet at the first round already, the new dawn beams.
Had I known that, we would not have reached our hearts at all.

“Short Autumn Night” complete text

When Manhae published these works in the late 1930s, the Sijo revival movement in Korea had seen solid achievements by Karam and Nosan. It goes without saying that the Shijo revival was an attempt by the nationalists to counter the class supremacist stance of KAPF with its emphasis on national tradition. According to

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27 Kim Chae-hong, Han Yong-un Munhak Yon’gu, Iljisa, 1980
the nationalist literary school, literature could be formed not by foreign ideologies but only by firmly hanging on to the rope of history and tradition. Now, shijo was the oldest of traditional Korean literature. It was, moreover, an indigenous and superb national artform. The only problem was that due to its long history of continuous use, it lacked novelty, and novelty is something that can be considered as a major element of literary success. To overcome this limit they advocated the pursuit of the unique personality of the writer, new forms of diction, and other attempts to open a new dimension in terms of form and technique. Karam Yi Pyŏng-gi, for one, was particularly sensitive to these problems and possibilities. He realized that the characteristic feature distinguishing shijo consisted in its smooth flow of melody. He believed, therefore, that the essence of shijo composition lay in carrying on the noble tone of the classical models. Of course, reviving the traditional tone could not mean some dogmatic imitation of the traditional form. To prevent such a mistake, he added detailed advice: first, real sentiments and emotions should be expressed; second, the topic range should be expanded; third, anachronistic diction should be abandoned; fourth, attempts to diversify tone should be encouraged; and finally, one should take care to refine its form. It is when we judge him by these criteria that Manhae’s modern shijo appears seriously marred by stale diction; there is no evidence of Manhae relishing the delicacy of expression that served as the precondition of modern shijo.

Manhae’s classical Chinese poetry, however, is a different story. Unlike his shijos, Manhae’s 163 poems in 1300 stanzas of Chinese poetry show a spectrum of rich diversity. Some are marked by a strong sense of anti-Japanese spirit of resistance.

As this year’s stock of piled time wears thin,
The noise of the Japanese army has reached even this deep mountain village
Putting it all upside down, they would pilfer heaven and earth
Even the rainy wind from remote lands feels familiar.

Clearly shown in these lines is the poet’s great abhorrence of the Japanese exploitation of his beloved homeland. The piece was probably written in the early days of Japanese colonial rule. One can see a similar conception in a poem praising the virtue of Maech’on

Choosing righteousness, he died for his country
His virtue should not wither away through all eternity.

28 Yi Pyŏng-kt, Shijo-nin Hyŏksun-haja, Karam Mansŏn, Singu Munhwasa, 1966, pp. 310-316
Linger not behind because of that which you would have finished
For many are those who admire your loving service

Hwang Maech’ŏn, who is the topic of this poem, was the person who committed suicide upon hearing the news of the 1910 treaty officially recognizing Japanese colonial rule. The original Chinese text contains a reference to a line of Maech’ŏn’s, which stresses the complete correspondence of Manhae’s ideas with those of Maech’ŏn. Manhae was thoroughly armed with the great principle under colonial rule, the spirit of resistance. These merits notwithstanding, Manhae’s Chinese verses do reveal definite limits. Poetry is an art form, whose self-justification cannot stand on the grounds of intentional ideas alone. Intentions or ideas ought to be uplifted into organic forms by artistic means. Manhae’s poems in Chinese letters were written after the modern period began. Modernity in literary history should be understood as something founded on a recognition of the vitality of one’s national language. Literary modernity, in terms of the medium of expression, must be distinguished by a sharp sensitivity to Hangul. Manhae’s Chinese verse satisfies neither of these requirements. For this reason alone, Manhae’s poems in classical Chinese have to be seen as seriously flawed.

The qualms one has about Manhae’s fiction, essays, shijo, and Chinese verse, however, are clearly dispelled by the pieces contained in My Lover’s Silence. There are altogether 88 pieces in the published volume. Of these, some 10 pieces or so can be selected as those putting Manhae’s poetic reputation on solid grounds. These are, “My Lover’s Silence,” “I do not know,” “Wish As I Do To Forget,” “The Artist,” “The Ferry Boat and the Wanderer,” “The Measure of Love,” “Secret,” “Obedience,” “Willow Planted,” “Flower Knew Before I Did,” “Your Letter,” and “The Secret of Numbers.” One finds in these not only a distinct awareness of the stylistic requirements demanded by modern Korean poetry but numerous instances of strikingly modern techniques.

Others say they love freedom, but I like obedience.
Not that I don’t know freedom, but I just wish to obey you.
Obeying when one wants to obey is sweeter than beautiful freedom. That is my happiness.
But if you tell me I should obey some other person, that’s one thing I can’t obey
For in obeying that other one, I cannot obey you.

Even a casual look will tell us that this is not written in traditional verse form.

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Yet it is in the flow of its coherent tone that the vocal structure requisite for poetry comes alive to a certain extent. Side by side with such traces of self-conscious formal craftsmanship, one can detect a considerable amount of care accorded to the structure of meaning. Faced with the object to whom he wants to submit absolutely, he opts for obedience rather than freedom. Such is the intensity of his respect for the object. But obedience here cannot mean accepting the order by the object to remove his obedience to some other object. To the speaker, that is clearly going against his freedom and happiness. This way, what initially appeared a blind confession of obedience reveals the archetypal form of freedom it harbors within. There is no greater key to the modernity of the poem’s technique than this. That is, the surface statement of the work is different from the underlying meaning. Yet the two are intertwined in a single context to form a solid form/structure. This cannot but be decisive evidence of this poem’s having opened a superb dimension of modernity.

In My Lover’s Silence, one finds another aspect that contributed to the enlarging of the scope of modern Korean poetry. Korean poetry before Manhae generally remained at the level of one-dimensional language. The words were often used to charge things in nature or human life with emotions. But the content of its message was close to being flat and direct, instead of being potently complex and comprehensive. This situation was drastically altered by My Lover’s Silence. A case in point is the use of the word nim (my lover), which serves as the central term defining the object signified and sung by the poet. The word refers at one and the same time, first, to the object of Buddhist faith, second, to the nation for whom he struggled all his life, and third, to a person of another sex whom he loves. Poetry essentially ought to be less directly referential and more suggestive and productive of implied meanings. It is so because the breadth and depth of a poetic work depends on this. Whereas poetry before Manhae failed to do so, My Lover’s Silence shows this important component of poetic essence. Quite clearly, Manhae’s My Lover’s Silence was a crucial contribution to the exploration of new dimensions in the Korean poetic imagination.

There is an even greater significance of My Lover’s Silence. Poems written after the opening of Korean seaports to foreign trade can be broadly classified into two categories. The first is “physical poetry,” whose main job is to “physically” describe mountains, fields, flowers, the sea, the sunset, ships, etc. Chu Yo-han, Kim Ŭk, and Kim So-wol’s fine lyrical pieces belong to this type. The second type consists of those directly pouring out ideas, thoughts, principles of action, and historical

30 Kim Yong-juk, Han’guk kŏndaeh Shisa, Hakyŏnsha, 1986, pp. 437–446
consciousness. Good examples of this school can be found in the didactic poems by Yukdang and Goju published during the Enlightenment Period. Later, the New Tendency school, who aimed to overcome the literature of tears and daydreaming, produced a great mass of this type of poetry in its ardor to pursue a unified ideology. We call this poetry "conceptual poetry." According to J. C. Ransom, poetry must not only give us a refreshing shock and new experience but construct in itself a sensuous whole like a balmy rose. But the "physical poetry" tends to convey a certain sense of boredom, while the ideologically inclined "conceptual poetry" contains the danger of reducing poetry into a bare skeleton supporting action-oriented ideas. In *My Lover's Silence* Manhae superbly completed the task of incorporating these two trends.

Whose footsteps do the leaves of paulownia tree trace as they fall in an windless air with vertical repercussions? Whose face is the blue sky of which one takes short glimpses through the crevices in the black sky as it is chased away by the west wind after a tedious long spell of monsoon? Whose breath is this unknowable balm that passes through the green lichen of a deep flowerless tree and brushes past the firmament above the old pagoda? Whose poem is the evening glow decking in pretty colors the falling day that treads the boundless sea with its steps of lotus blossom and fondles with its hands of jade the endless sky? The ashy remains of burnt fire become oil. Whose night does my heart ceaselessly burning illuminate with its weak lamplight?

At first sight, one could take this as a "physical poem," for the images used are physical objects of nature such as the leaves of a paulownia tree, the balm brushing past the old pagoda, and the evening glow. But they don't simply imitate nature; rather, they encompass a realm deeper than surface nature. Indeed, in the first line the leaves fall vertically as nature prescribes. But the question put on the topic, by asking "whose face is it?", brings in a spiritual world of an entirely different dimension. A similar situation is obtained in the subsequent lines. The images of blue sky, the balm passing past the old pagoda, and the evening glow all carry with them a mysterious world underlying the poem's universe. This shows that this poem is not simply a "physical poem" but contains a profound spiritual world, a world of those primary principles of ideas and thoughts. Yet Manhae does not directly speak of these ideas. He has wonderfully transformed these into sensuous realities. A decisive example is the final line: "Whose night does my heart ceaselessly burning illuminate with its weak lamplight?" This is preceded by "The ashy remains of

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burnt fire become oil.” This reminds us of the doctrine of pratītya-samutpāda (dependent origination), and Shiilsang, which is one of the principles of Buddhism. Generation and transformation in Buddhism signify nothingness and emptiness. From this derives the central idea of Mahāyāna Buddhism that color and emptiness are the same, that essence is phenomenon and that phenomenon is essence. Manhae’s line reveals the agnostic attitude implicit in this doctrine. But such religious revelation does not itself constitute poetry. To become poetry, one needs to sensuously actualize that idea or notion. What accomplishes this task is the part that follows it. “Heart” here stands for human mind. In itself, it cannot serve as sensuous actuality. Manhae, therefore, identified this ideational entity with the lamplight, which is a sensuous entity measurable in quantitative terms. This way, human mind has been transmuted into an emotional entity like a balmy rose. Moreover, one should be aware of the fact that this second part stands parallel to the first. Through this parallel, the highly metaphysical Buddhist principle of generation of being from nothingness has found an emotional equivalent. This should sufficiently attest to the great contribution My Lover’s Silence made to Korean poetry. The collection is the first in the history of modern Korean poetry to have sowed the seed of philosophical poetry in what had been until then a mere wasteland. Manhae’s achievement in this particular field is truly immense, as he had opened the door to a new phase of Korean literary history in the mid-1920s.

5. The One Who Prevailed Over a Tragic Situation
—A Concluding Note

Thus far we have traced Manhae’s achievement in the three different fields of Buddhism, the nationalist movement, and poetry. In the realm of Buddhism, he propounded the necessity of the “renovation of Buddhism” to revive the religious life of the nation, and left an abiding legacy of systematizing Buddhist doctrine by studying all the major Buddhist texts. Moreover, by founding the Young Buddhists’ Association and the Mandala Party, he strove, on the one hand, to modernize Buddhism, and on the other hand, to carry on the tradition of patriotic Buddhism that dates back to the Silla dynasty. Thus, he included anti-Japanese struggle in the practical agenda of Buddhist action.

His contribution to the nationalist movement is also a distinguished and prominent one. Early in his life, he crossed the border to find ways of military

32 Kim Yong-jik, op cit p 455
struggle to recover national sovereignty. When that was not successful enough, he returned to Korea to organize active anti-Japanese resistance. A decisive manifestation of his efforts is his participation in the March 1 Movement as a national representative. After he was released from prison, he never stopped his anti-imperialist struggle despite all the surveillance, restrictions, and persecutions by the Japanese. This put him in the category of an "extra-special case for inspection" in the files of the Japanese colonial police. His literary activities have equally left a distinct and enormous trace behind. His fiction, poetry, and essays, all contain implications of what he took to be the great principle of action under colonial rule, the conscious nationalist struggle against the Japanese. Not only that, but in his poetic creations, notably in the lyrics collected in *My Lover's Silence*, he contributed to the opening of a new dimension of Korean poetry. Only with his works could Korean poetry add to its list a new dimension of poems whose uplifting emotions incorporated the depth of ideas. These facts alone ought to be sufficient to give him an eminent place in Korea's modern history. But his achievements do not stop here. As we have repeatedly emphasized, Manhae lived in a period of colonial rule when all forms of nationalist activity were ruthlessly persecuted and suppressed. He devoted his entire life to the anti-Japanese movement. Yet he was not executed by the Japanese, nor did he die from the sufferings inflicted by them. This proves the fact that he prevailed over the tragic conditions of the times.

To appreciate how unique Manhae's lifework was in this regard, one has to remember the characteristics of the Japanese colonial rule. The period of Japanese colonial rule means literally what it says: Koreans forfeited their sovereignty and fell into a state of abject servitude. The Japanese imperialist, once they began ruling Korea, conspired to perpetuate and complete their domination of the Korean nation. For this purpose, they spared nothing in wielding their iron hand to eradicate anti-imperialist, national-liberation movements of any kind. It was under such circumstances that a nationalist had to wage his struggle. That was the only way he could become an activist serving the cause of national independence. One can say, therefore, that the independence movement was the tragic flaw of the nationalist leader. According to the principles of tragedy, all protagonists with tragic flaws are bound to face their destruction. Those to whom this principle cannot but be applied literally are those involved in the liberation movement under the Japanese colonial regime. Thus, following this rule, Ilsong Kim Tong-sam, who headed the anti-Japanese struggle in Manchuria, was sacrificed, and Tosan An Ch'ang-ho also passed away. And the former independence movement leaders such as Ch'oe Lin, Yi Kwang-su, and Ch'oe Nam-sôn defected to the enemy camp. The reason Manhae
became what he was has to do with the fact that he never followed their suit. As we have shown in detail, he lived all his life an incarnation of anti-Japanese struggle. Never did he stoop to the enemy’s persecution or conciliation. Yet he did not die of illness incurred during the Japanese’ torture, or of fury at the Japanese’ unjust restrictions and interference. To the last, he remained confident of the final defeat of Japanese imperialism, and closed his eyes in that firm belief. For him life and death stood outside the boundary of the political situation of his times. This is yet one more reason to reserve the highest place of honor in the history of modern Korea for Manhac Han Yong-un.

(Translated by Shynne Gwanghyun, Professor of English, Seoul National University)

GLOSSARY

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