

Women, Confucianism and nation-building in Han Yongun's novel *Death*

Han Yongun (1879-1944) was a Buddhist monk, an ardent Korean nationalist and a great poet, active during the colonial period (1910-1945). Buddhism is generally seen as the underlying ideology of his spiritual, nationalist and literary practices. It is often held that his nationalism and literature could remain morally and politically pure, original and non-compromising thanks to its grounding in profound Buddhist philosophy. But Buddhism was not his only religious belief. Nor was it the only political instrument of anti-Japanese resistance and Korean nationalism. Jung-Shim Lee reveals a more complicated and heterogeneous relationship between religion and politics in Han's writings than is often assumed.

Jung-Shim Lee



THE FACT THAT HAN YONGUN was a Buddhist monk has led many scholars to limit their scope of enquiry to Buddhism and ignore the possible influences of other religions. I will argue, however, that it was Confucianism rather than Buddhism which inspired his political critiques. Han tellingly opposed the subservience of Buddhism to narrow nationalist or political goals by proclaiming its fundamental and universal characteristics. He was also very familiar with Confucian learning, which had formed the basis of his education in the first half of his life. Internalised Confucianism had a long-lasting influence on his political thought. In particular, he formulated his vision for nation-building based upon a Confucian-inspired politics of gender. He shared this perspective with many other Korean male nationalists, as well as with the Japanese colonial masters. It is a trend that can be observed in his novels, where virtuous and self-sacrificial models of women are invoked from the Confucian tradition and Confucian impositions upon women are romanticised. His novel *Death* (*Chugŭm*, 1924) is an example of one of the earliest and most-sustained nation-building efforts of Han Yongun.

A love triangle

Death was written not long after Han Yongun was released from prison in 1922. He had been one of 33 national representatives who led the anti-Japanese March First Movement (1919). The March 1 protests were brutally suppressed and Han Yongun was imprisoned by the colonial authorities for three years. The Korean society he returned to from prison had changed completely. A new group of educated women called *sin yŏsŏng* (New Women) had emerged, proclaiming a new age which they characterised with the word *yŏnae* (free love). *Yŏnae* was a newly translated Western import that reached colonial Korea through Japan or China. It became popular among young people, and was put into practice as the hottest cultural trend. Stories on free love and marriage, love affairs, the overthrow of female chastity, the failure of love, divorce, re-marriage, and love-induced insanity and suicide filled the newspapers of the 1920s. This historical atmosphere became the background for the plot of Han's novel *Death*.

The novel deals with a love triangle involving *Yŏngok* and her two suitors, *Chongch'ŏl* and *Sŏngyŏl*. *Yŏngok* and *Chongch'ŏl* are in love. They are freed from traditional customs of early and arranged marriage, experiencing instead free choice in love and marriage. The passion of *Sŏngyŏl* – the rejected suitor – is supposed to represent many married men who also look for ardent romance outside their (loveless) marriages. In particular, *Sŏngyŏl*'s insistent talk of 'the sanctity of love', 'fluid chastity' and 'absolute freedom of love' correspond to the lexicon of the contemporary free love movement. In this way, Han brought into focus one of the most controversial issues of the time:

the fact that many highly-educated women were becoming mistresses or concubines. The writer's view of this social phenomenon was neither sympathetic nor supportive. Free love is only discussed under the rubric of decadence. Its various implications from the struggle for women's emancipation, individual self-realisation and the consumption of modernity, to confrontation with traditional customs as well as the diverse voices and experiences of social actors are neglected. The advocates of free love are condemned either as prostitutes or libertines. Of particular note is the fact that all blame and responsibility is shifted to women. Han was not alone in this view, most Korean male intellectuals of the period shared a similar outlook. They regarded female students as being sick with vanity. They lamented and condemned free love practices, such as concubinage and prostitution, as women's moral degeneration.

The reinvention of Confucian chastity

In reaction to the decadent tendencies of free love, Han Yongun reinvented Confucian moral injunctions of chastity, decency and fidelity and portrayed them as ideal conduct for women living in the 1920s. In his novel, he directly articulates that a woman could not be fully happy without receiving the love of a man but that men only give pure and undying love in exchange for women's 'pure chastity'. Thus, unchaste women never achieve true love and happiness. The heroine *Yŏngok* is depicted as a traditionally virtuous woman who observes female chastity and thinks it is a woman's duty and honour to serve a husband. Such Confucian femininity and the underlying gender hierarchy are explained as intrinsic parts of the nation-building process for colonial Korea. This is one reason that the role of motherhood for women is stressed. The woman's body is claimed primarily in relation to child-bearing. This negates the body itself, its sexual nature and its role in romance and pleasure. According to Han, women's bodies conceive, raise and sustain members of the (Korean) nation who will construct future Korean society. Women's role in educating children would properly determine the future of Korea. It follows then, that chaste love and marriage form the way to create the identity of the pure nation. Love void of chastity (*yŏnae*) becomes 'anti-national' behaviour and can ruin the sacred project of nation-building. By depicting the death of the heroine's (nationalist) father in the novel, Han indeed showed how chaste and unchaste women determine the success or failure of the national undertaking.

'Good wife, wise mother'

Han's gendered vision of nation-building very much resembles that of the colonial master, in particular that of the Japanese Meiji state at the end of 19th century. The Meiji government embarked on a programme of modernisation to construct

a strong nation-state. For that goal, Shinto and Confucian ideology were reinvented to enforce the Meiji's hierarchical social order. Its feminine ideal of 'good wife, wise mother' became a crucial element in political discourses on the family and women. Ironically, Meiji women had to be traditional, Confucian-inspired, submissive, self-sacrificing mothers and wives in order to modernise their nation. The non-traditional Japanese New Women who violated feminine norms were considered as dangerous, threatening, and corrupted by Western ideas of love and individualism. This early Meiji version of gender politics became the object of criticism when Japan entered the new period of Taisho Democracy (1905-1932). Yet, the hierarchical view of gender and women was still used for colonial domination. In a colonial relationship, the Japanese coloniser defined itself as a strong, masculine, rational grown-up man whereas the colonised Korea was regarded as a weak, innocent, emotional woman. The feminised Koreans were required to be submissive and self-sacrificial to the colonial ruler, as a woman does to a man. The gendered vision in Meiji nation-state building and in its colonial venture in Korea was not challenged or inverted by Korean male nationalists such as Han Yongun during the 1920s. Rather, it was translated and reworked for their own effort to construct Korean identity and community.

Nation-building in colonial Korea

Ironically, in attempting to create a modern sense of Korean identity and to oppose the imposed vision of Korea generated by the Japanese, Han Yongun reproduced the coloniser's vision of Confucian-inspired, gendered nation-building. The example of Han Yongun blurs the lines between coloniser and colonised, resistance and collaboration, tradition and modernity and sheds light on a more hybrid and heterogeneous Korean nation-building plan. Han's nationalist effort was not simply a copy of Japanese discourses. In his novel he also emphasises other, distinctive features of his imagined Korean nation-building process. One example is the awareness of the colonial experience seen in his vision of Korean nationalism. The Korean struggle to build a unified and independent community was described in terms of its conflict with the colonial power's attempt to seduce and enforce Koreans towards a different identity – that of colonial subjects. This set Korean nationalism apart from the Japanese experience. The love triangle in the novel was conceived of as a metaphor for this kind of political relationship, and thereby to express the political struggle of the Koreans.

The chaste love between *Yŏngok* and *Chongch'ŏl* is designed to show pure Korean identity and society in the future but it is constantly disturbed by another man, *Sŏngyŏl*, who symbolises the Japanese coloniser. This is alluded to through the *Sŏngyŏl*'s strong connections with Japan (Waseda University and the colonial governmental newspaper). *Sŏngyŏl*'s sexual desire to make the heroine his concubine reveals the political desire of the Japanese coloniser to transform the Koreans into colonial subjects. Han showed the female body as being subject to another man's temptation through sweet talk and money, and to his coercive power through sexual harassment, false rumour and, ultimately, through the killing of her husband. This depiction alludes to the political experiences of Korea whose autonomous attempt to build a strong nation-state is interfered with and frustrated by the colonial authorities. The end of novel, where the faithful heroine keeps her loyalty to the deceased husband and punishes the murderer rather than becoming subject to him sends a strong message. Han is saying that despite the loss of the country (colonisation), the process of nation-building will go on and eventually counteract colonialism.

Han Yongun's novel remained unpublished and therefore his vision of nation-building woven within it was not able to reach contemporary readers. Nonetheless, this unpublished manuscript is important as historical source material for re-evaluating his approach to nationalism. His nationalist vision revealed in the novel is divergent from the habitually assumed Buddhist nationalism characterised by anti-Japanese resistance. Han shared Confucian masculine imagery with the colonial authorities and resisted the advocates of free love as did the Japanese authorities. He repeated the colonial discourse in order to run counter to it. Hence, his nationalist effort cannot be considered a pure form of nationalism, but should be better understood as a complex process characterised by ambivalence and hybridity. Han cannot avoid being subjected to post-colonial critiques which have emphasised the violence of Korean nationalism. To achieve political freedom from Japanese colonialism, Korean nationalism turned out to have exercised the same controlling oppressive power over the colonised (in particular women) and have deprived them of their individual freedom. It should not be overlooked that such nationalist violence was very much part of his vision of Korean nation-building.

Jung-Shim Lee
Leiden University
j.lee@hum.leidenuniv.nl