

Cover Page



Universiteit Leiden



The handle <http://hdl.handle.net/1887/20839> holds various files of this Leiden University dissertation.

**Author:** Lee, Jung-Shim

**Title:** Buddhist writers in colonial Korea : rethinking Korean literature, religion and history during the colonial period, 1910-1945

**Issue Date:** 2013-04-24

## Chapter 1

### A doubtful national hero: Han Yongun's Buddhist nationalism revisited

#### Introduction

It is commonplace to say that Han Yongun was a hero who led the Korean nation through its darkest period of colonial history. His participation in the March First Independence Movement (1919), his flat rejection of the colonial government's civil registry and name-change order, and his attempts to reform and modernize Buddhism, to oppose its subordination to Japanese Buddhism and the colonial government's intervention in Buddhist affairs, and to boost national spirit through his literature are told and retold as proof of his uncompromising attitude towards Japanese colonial rule and his unwavering striving for national independence throughout his lifetime. It is often held that his nationalism and literature could remain morally and politically pure, correct, flawless, original, and prominent due to its grounding in his profound Buddhist philosophy.<sup>1</sup>

In present-day Korea where, to borrow a phrase from Carter J. Eckert, "the nationalist historical discourse is buttressed by strong vested interests throughout the community",<sup>2</sup> Han Yongun is hailed as a symbol of heroic nationalism, a source of national pride whose spiritual, cultural, and political achievements in this era of globalization can contribute not only to Korea but to the world. It is against this backdrop that recent scholars have begun to express deep concern about the hero-worship of Han Yongun and to question whether these commonplace beliefs are really tenable. There is a growing recognition in scholarship both in Korean and English that questions the nationalist interpretations that dominate numerous existing studies, reconsiders Han's nationalist ideas from new and diverse perspectives,<sup>3</sup> looks at the ambivalence

---

<sup>1</sup> Pori Park, "A Korean Buddhist Response to Modernity: The Doctrinal Underpinning of Han Yongun's (1879-1944) Reformist Thought" in *Seoul Journal of Korean Studies* 20.1 (2007): 21-44; Chŏng Kwangho 정광호, "Minjokhon-ŭi sangjŏng Han Yongun" 민족혼의 상징 한용운 in *Ilbon ch'innakshigi-ŭi Hanil Pulgyo kwanggyesa* 일본침략시기의 한일불교관계사 (Seoul: Aŭmdaun sesang, 2001), pp.299-246; Cho Chihun 趙芝薰, "Minjokchŭŭija Han Yongun" 民族主義者 韓龍雲 in *Sajo*思潮 (Oct. 1958). Republished in *Han Yongun chŏnjip* 4 韓龍雲全集 4 (Seoul: Pulgyo munhwa yŏn'guwŏn, 2006), pp.362-366; Hong Ibyŏn 洪以燮, "Han Yongun-ŭi minjok chŏngsin" 韓龍雲의 민족精神 in *Korea Journal* 13.4 (April 1973). Republished in *Han Yongun chŏnjip* 4, pp.367-373.

<sup>2</sup> Carter J. Eckert, "Epilogue: Exorcising Hegel's Ghosts: Toward a Postnationalist Historiography of Korea" in *Colonial Modernity in Korea*. Edited by Gi-Wook Shin and Michael Robinson (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Asia Center, 1999), p.364.

<sup>3</sup> Ku Moryong 구모룡, "Manhae sasang-esŏŭi chayu-wa p'yŏngdŭng" 만해사상에서의 자유와 평등 in *Manhaehak yŏn'gu* 2 만해학연구 2 (2006):36-59; Pae Pyŏngsam 배병삼, "Manhae Han Yongun-ŭi sahoe sasang-gwa silch'ŏn-e taehan pip'an-jŏk koch'al" 만해 한용운의 사회사상과 실천에 대한 비판

and complexity of his literature,<sup>4</sup> and discusses larger problems within Buddhism.<sup>5</sup>

This chapter is one of the attempts to revise our understanding of Han Yongun, in particular tackling the popularly accepted cliché of his Buddhist nationalism. Since he was a Buddhist monk, his Buddhism is naturally seen as the underlying ideology of all his ideas and practices. As Pori Park has stated, Han related Buddhist reformation to national identity and tried to develop a socially conscious Buddhism.<sup>6</sup> However, it is hardly addressed that while relating Buddhism to politics, Han clearly opposed the politicization of Buddhism as a political instrument to serve colonial and nationalist interests and goals. Rather than equating religious beliefs with political agendas, I argue, he was aware of the difference between religion and national politics in terms of identity, ideals and goals, and regarded religion as more fundamental than any ideology. Evident in his later writing is his emphasis on self-reflection or self-cultivation within nationalism in place of anti-Japanese sentiment. My analysis of a broad range of neglected texts mainly written in the 1930s will reveal how his own views concerning the relationship between Buddhist and national affairs were significantly more diverse and even more controversial than is often thought.

### Self-reliance: demystifying resistance nationalism

The Buddhism Han Yongun practised as a monk is assumed to have primarily served nationalist purposes. He is seen as a true nationalist whose spirit of resistance was as firm and correct as his Buddhist belief and as acute and uncompromising as that of the armed independence fighters active outside colonial Korea. His strong resistance nationalism is further assumed to stand in

---

적 고찰 in *Manhaehak yŏn'gu* 3:7-31; Yi Sŏni 이선이, "Munmyŏng-gwa minjog-ŭl t'onghae pon Manhae-ŭi kŭndae ihae" '문명'과 '민족'을 통해 본 만해의 근대이해 in *Manhaehak yŏn'gu* 3:34-52.

<sup>4</sup> See Gregory N. Evon, "Eroticism and Buddhism in Han Yongun's Your Silence" in *Korean Studies* 24 (2000): 25-52, and his "Ghostly Voices and Their Avatar: Buddhist Resonances in Han Yongun's Enlightenment Verse" in *The Review of Korean Studies* 3.1 (2000):93-122; Yi Sŏni 李善伊, "Manhae Han Yongun munhag-e nat'an'an t'alsingminjjuŭi-jŏk insik" 만해 韓龍雲 文學에 나타난 脫植民主義의 인식 in *Ōmun yŏn'gu* 語文研究 31:2 (Summer 2003):245-263.

<sup>5</sup> Kim Kwangsik 김광식. *Kŭnhyŏndae Pulgyo-ŭi chae chomyŏng* 근현대불교의 재조명 (Seoul: Minjoksa, 2000), pp.18-22; Hendrik H. Sørensen, "Buddhism and secular power in twentieth-century Korea" in *Buddhism and Politics in Twentieth-Century Asia*, edited by Ian Harris (London and New York: Continuum, 1999), pp.127-152; Gregory N. Evon, "Contestations over Korean Buddhist Identities: The "Introduction" to the Kyŏnghŏjip" in *The Review of Korean Studies* 4.1. (2001):11-33; Pori Park, "Korean Buddhist Reforms and Problems in the Adoption of Modernity during the Colonial Period" in *Korean Studies* 45.1:87-113; Pori Park, "A Korean Buddhist Response to Modernity: The Doctrinal Underpinning of Han Yongun's (1879-1944) Reformist Thought" in *Seoul Journal of Korean Studies* 20.1 (2007): 21-44; Vladimir Tikhonov and Own Miller, "Introduction" in *Selected writings of Han Yongun: From Social Darwinism to 'Socialism with a Buddhist Face'* (Kent: Global Oriental, 2008):1-36.

<sup>6</sup> Pori Park "A Korean Buddhist Response to Modernity," pp.27-28 and 35-36.

sharp contrast to the attitudes of the cultural nationalists who had a low spirit of resistance and reached compromises with the colonial authorities.<sup>7</sup> However, I will argue that Han should be reconsidered as one of the self-reconstruction nationalists. The core of his nationalism was neither anti-colonialism nor resistance but self-reflection, self-reliance, and self-cultivation. He shared nationalist ideas and views with many cultural nationalists and actively participated in their campaigns.

Han's famous treatise, *Chosŏn Pulgyo yusillon* 朝鮮佛教維新論 (A treatise on the reformation of Korean Buddhism, 1913), is one of the first texts in which his early self-reflection emerges. As is well known, this long treatise was written to devise a reform plan for the Korean Buddhist monasteries, which had by then badly deteriorated. The introduction of this reform proposal makes it clear that Han seeks the reason for the degradation of Korean Buddhism inside the Buddhist community rather than accusing the Confucian state of its suppression or blaming unfavorable circumstances. He emphasizes this "self-critical attitude" towards Buddhism, and further, towards all human affairs.<sup>8</sup> He strongly refutes the ancients' saying that everything depends upon heaven (*hanül*) or is the will of heaven. According to him, this customary conviction is outdated, illogical, and superstitious in the eyes of a "civilized person" (*munmyŏng'in*) who believes that everything depends on oneself. He argues that one should get things done through one's own efforts, capabilities or mistakes, and therefore it is the person involved who has full responsibility for whatever happens to one.<sup>9</sup>

Han stands for this self-reliance, further equating it with the virtue of freedom. He accuses those relying on heaven as "slaves" or "sinners" who forsake their own freedom and are deficient in self-esteem. He states that those who fully understand the spirit of "I endeavor" and "everything depends on me" level blame on themselves instead of others and believe in themselves without counting on other things like heaven. Self-reliance, self-blame, and self-esteem are argued by him to be the guiding principles to reform Korean Buddhism.<sup>10</sup> He radically espouses the removal of all the elements in the contemporary Korean Buddhist monasteries that run counter to this "self-reliance" principle: the *Yŏmbultang* (Buddha invocation hall) should be abolished because people resort to the false image of Buddha instead of seeking Buddhahood inside themselves; monks should be self-sufficient and stop engaging in religious mendicancy; and all the relics of idolatry and superstitions in Buddhism should be taken away.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Yŏm Muung 임무웅, "Han Yongun non" 韓龍雲論 in Pak Ch'ŏrhŭi (ed), *Han Yongun* 한용운, (Seoul: Sŏgang tahakkyo ch'ulp'anbu, 1997/2002), pp.33-34.

<sup>8</sup> Han Yongun, *Han Yongun chŏnjip* 2, p.34.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., pp.56-60, 70-75, and 78-82.

About a decade later, Han Yongun addressed the notion again, but this time as the very nature of Buddhism. In his essay “Nae-ga minnŭn Pulgyo” (내가 믿는 佛教: The Buddhism I believe in, 1924), he explains why he believes in Buddhism and what he sincerely and single-mindedly believes.<sup>12</sup> It is first and foremost that Buddhism is self-belief or self-faith (*chasinjŏk*, 自信的). By this he means that Buddhism seeks its object of faith inside oneself, not outside oneself. The customary Buddhist practice of praying to Buddha’s supernatural powers is, according to him, not the true nature of Buddhism. Instead of worshipping other powers such as Heaven or God as in other religions, proper Buddhist belief leads its followers to seek one’s true self and gives them a sense of self-reliance.

As far as his early writing is concerned, Han Yongun’s discussion on self-reliance and self-blame is basically confined to religion and philosophy. However, although it remains abstract, he gradually begins to specify its meaning and role in national circumstances. In 1923, the *Tonga ilbo* 東亞日報 asked Han (as a representative of a Buddhist association, Pöppohoe 法寶會) for advice on how to cope with the spiritual and material hardship colonial Korea and the Koreans experienced.<sup>13</sup> Han first sympathizes with emotional pain and economic despair the Koreans faced in reality. Yet he dispassionately explains that the suffering cannot be diminished by blaming, resisting (*chŏhang*) or begging the Japanese colonial authorities, who have, in his words, taken away Koreans’ freedom. In his view, such responses are the most certain way to make people feel suffering, even keenly. How then can they get rid of all their suffering? Han answers that no matter what the situation is, one’s mind is most important. The point is that if one has a strong mind and spiritual strength one does not feel the suffering, whereas being weak and poor in spirit intensifies the suffering. He emphasizes the practice of cultivating and strengthening spirituality as a key factor in handling the Koreans’ hardship.

From this article, one can gain a glimpse of Han’s alternative way of seeing and settling the difficulties of his compatriots. He does not promote resistance and resentment against the colonial authorities, nor dependence on them. Based upon the self-reliance principle, he focuses on the Korean self rather than on the colonial oppressor and tries to find the solution within the Koreans themselves, particularly seeking their spiritual empowerment. It is much later, after another decade or so has passed, that he more explicitly applies his vision to colonial society and elaborates his idea of nationalism by drawing upon the concept of self-reliance. Of his various works treating this issue, I will focus on his essay “Pansŏng” 反省 (Self-reflection, ca. 1933).

In this essay, Han first points out the general tendency in human society for people to blame their problems and misfortunes on outside groups.

---

<sup>12</sup> *Kaehyŏk* 開闢 (March 1924).

<sup>13</sup> “Chosŏn kŭp Chosŏnin-ŭi pŏnmin p’al: Yŏngjŏk pinp’ib-ŭro kot’ong” 朝鮮及朝鮮人の煩悶 八: 靈的貧乏으로 苦痛 in *Tonga ilbo* (9 Jan. 1923).

The poor tend to resent the rich. A man with low status is apt to begrudge a person of high standing. The weak reproach the strong. Han flatly opposes this habit, saying, "Whoever makes you poor is not the rich but you yourself. Whoever makes you weak is not the strong but you yourself. Whoever makes you distressed is neither society, nor heaven or earth, nor the times but you yourself. Thus, while it is your right to make yourself happy you ought to take responsibility for your unhappiness".<sup>14</sup> It is not his intention to simply forbid people to desire to be rich or strong or to wish that the rich or strong be poor or weak like them. What he is basically trying to say is that one should seek the main causes and effects of all human affairs in oneself. By blaming others and complaining about one's circumstances, one can temporarily forget one's problem and feel better, but this does not bring about fundamental change. He argues that change begins with oneself. In the face of difficulties, the first and wisest thing to do is to reflect on illusory thought and misbehavior. An effort made by oneself is the strongest weapon on behalf of happiness.<sup>15</sup>

As mentioned above, Han in his early days tackled the customary belief that others are to blame for one's unhappiness. From a social-Darwinist point of view, he disdained this as superstitious and claimed that a civilized man holds the belief that everything depends on oneself. In his later writing, he no longer uses social-Darwinist terms, but maintained the main points of his argument in a clearer form. The ideas of self-reflection and self-responsibility which he put forward as the guiding principle to reform the Buddhist community are now developed and refashioned as important guidelines for the Korean people to live, think and act in colonial Korea.

*The despair over the loss of the country [Chosŏn Korea] is indescribable. However, the person who only resents the occupier will never resolve his deep sorrow. In extreme agony and distress, one is prone to reproach one's more affluent and powerful counterpart [Japan] but it will not bring happiness back...Even if the occupier (chōngbokkuk) self-destructs and the ruling counterpart becomes unhappy, unless one does not uproot the cause of national decay [in the Korean self], the second and third occupier will appear. Unless one eliminates the bane, one cannot free oneself from the agony. It is a matter of self-reflection or self-blame.*<sup>16</sup>

Han Yongun sees that the Koreans feel sorrow and live miserably in colonial Korea. In their predicament, they tend to lament the misfortune of losing sovereignty and often nurture resentment against Japan. As he points out, this entails a desire and expectation that the occupier will become even unhappier than themselves and in the end destroy itself. People think that when this happens, they can be freed from both the Japanese occupier and their

---

<sup>14</sup> Republished in *Han Yongun chŏnjip* 1, p.210.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p.211.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.210-211.

miserable reality. Han does not support or encourage this mindset, but on the contrary demands they change their mind or revise their thinking. He concedes that what happens to Japan can bring some change to them (even implying its retreat from Korea and national independence), and yet he argues that it would not amount to the removal of the fundamental cause of the misfortunes they suffer. Even the national goal of independence is not seen by him as the final solution, since the Koreans who regain charge of their national affairs will not have changed at all.

In the same way as Han sought the reason for the degradation of Korean Buddhism inside the Buddhist community rather than accusing the Confucian state of its suppression, so he looks for the main cause of the loss of the country and its misfortunes inside the Korean self rather than fiercely resenting Japan's colonization and oppression. Referring back to history, he states that no country ever perished through a foreign invasion unless it had first self-destructed.<sup>17</sup> That is to say, Chosŏn Korea perished fundamentally by the Koreans' own hands before being colonized by Japan; the Koreans let the Japanese occupy them. One might question whether this entails shifting all the blame onto the Koreans and acquits the Japanese colonizer of guilt, and whether his idea of self-blame was marshalled to justify the colonial domination.

Contrary to the standard viewpoint, Han indeed hardly raises a critical voice against colonial oppression in his writings on self-reliance. He avoids problematizing the colonial government and accusing it of oppression and domination. He does not encourage his compatriots to cultivate a fighting spirit against it. He only sticks to the principle of directing one's critical look towards oneself and to depending on oneself. His lack of criticism of colonial oppression and his advocacy of self-blame might be interpreted as giving indirect and tacit approval to Japan's colonial domination. However, his arguments are not aimed at making the Korean feel inferior or at justifying colonial domination.

On the contrary, Han's core intent is to motivate the Koreans to rehabilitate their self-esteem and attain spiritual and psychological independence from their colonial master. In the colonial relationship, the Japanese colonial government is presumed to be the agent and provider of change, whereas the Koreans are regarded as passive and submissive subjects and recipients. Against this conception, Han sets up the Koreans as the main agents of change. He clearly articulates that both misfortune and happiness are entirely dependent on the Koreans' own efforts. They are not given by the Japanese counterpart.<sup>18</sup> He makes it clear that blaming the colonial master means that the Koreans still depend upon him, that their minds are still bound to the colonizer-colonized relationship, and that they make themselves into "slaves." Reflecting on oneself is not to express self-depreciation but to

---

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p.210.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p.211.

challenge the deep-rooted dependence in the mind of the Koreans on external political powers, which he sees as the bane of their miserable colonial lives.

Han Yongun's national ideas with their focus on self-reliance constitute an important alternative to the existing nationalist view of his anti-colonial resistance nationalism. Few have noticed until now that he largely shared his ideas and insights with cultural nationalists, in particular self-reconstruction nationalists in colonial Korea. In his earliest essays, Yi Kwangsu 李光洙 also reiterated that Koreans were imbued with a fatalistic view of life, believing that all decisions are made by heaven (*ch'ŏnmyŏng*) and fate (*p'alcha*). Yi strongly argued that this "old superstitious belief" should be discarded. The Koreans should believe that it is they themselves who determine their lives and create happiness.<sup>19</sup> The passage by Han quoted above, in particular, is a textbook example of the classic cultural/self-reconstruction nationalist position.

Both key propagators of self-reconstruction nationalism, Yun Ch'ihŏ 尹致昊 and An Ch'angho 安昌浩, thought that Korea's colonial fate was a result of an absence of moral fortitude, lack of public morality, lack of self-reliance, and a fatal tendency to rely on larger powers in each individual Korean, rather than of the event of colonization itself. They spelled out that it was not Japan that ruined Korea. If any are to blame, it is Koreans: they allowed Japan to occupy their country. Nonetheless, the Korean people blame others for their misfortune without realizing their own responsibility. From this perspective, the proponents of self-reconstruction nationalism focused on the moral aspect of nationalism and argued that if the Koreans did not reconstruct themselves morally and spiritually and did not cultivate their moral capacity and spiritual strength, national independence would be difficult to achieve. They also believed that even were it to take one or two centuries, there was no other way but this non-political moral improvement for the Koreans to nurture the requisites of independence. Without this, even if Japan left and independence was restored today, the Koreans would lose it tomorrow.<sup>20</sup>

Han and other cultural nationalists did not share exactly the same nationalist ideas but their opinions to a larger extent concurred on the reason

---

<sup>19</sup> Yi Kwangsu 李光洙, "Sungmyŏngnon-jŏk insaenggwan-esŏ charyŏngnon-jŏk insaenggwan-e" 宿命論的人生觀에서自力論的人生觀에 in *Hakchigwang* 學之光 (Aug. 1918); Yi Kwangsu, "P'alchasŏr-ŭl kich'o-ro han Chosŏnin-ŭi insaenggwan" 八字說을 基礎로 한 朝鮮人の人生觀 in *Kabyŏk* 開闢 (Aug. 1921).

<sup>20</sup> For details about Protestant self-reconstruction movement, see Michael Edson Robinson, *Cultural Nationalism in Colonial Korea, 1920-1925* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1988); Ken Wells, *New God, New Nation: Protestants and Self-Reconstruction Nationalism in Korea, 1896-1937* (Allen & Unwin Pty Ltd, 1991) Transl. In Soo Kim, *Sae hananim sae minjok* 새 하나님 새 민족 (Seoul: Publishing House The Presbyterian Church of Korea, 1997); Koen de Ceuster "From Modernization to Collaboration, the Dilemma of Korean Cultural Nationalism" (PhD dissertation, Leuven, 1994); Pak Ch'ansŭng 박찬승, *Han'guk kŭndae chŏngch'i sasangsa yŏn'gu: Minjokchu'ui up'a-ŭi sillŏk yangsŏng undongnon* 한국근대정치사상사연구: 민족주의 우파의 실력양성운동론 (Seoul: Yŏksa pip'yŏngsa, 1992/1997); Chang Kyusik 장규식, *Ilcheha Han'guk Kidokkyo minjokchu'ui yŏn'gu* 일제하 한국 기독교 민족주의 연구 (Seoul: Hyeon, 2001).



for the loss of country, the emphasis on moral/spiritual values, and the importance of self-blame, self-responsibility, and self-reliance. Regardless of their philosophical and religious backgrounds (Han in Buddhism, whereas many of the cultural nationalists were Protestants), they crafted a shared national vision and sought to actively mobilize their compatriots toward the achievements of shared goals. In practice, too, Han closely cooperated with the cultural nationalists. When these nationalists embarked on a large campaign to promote Korean products (*Chosŏn mulsan changnyŏ undong*, 朝鮮物産獎勵運動), a movement to raise funds for a Korean university (*Millip taehak sŏllip undong*, 民立大學設立運動) and a movement to foster the Korean vernacular language, Han actively supported these movements and was an invited speaker on the topic of “chajo” (自助, self-help). In 1931, he joined hands with Protestant cultural nationalist leaders such as Yun Ch’iho and Sin Hŭng’u in leprosy research and relief works.<sup>21</sup> Han Yongun, who proclaimed that “*Chosŏn undong* (Korean national movement) should be called *munhwa undong* (cultural movement) in Korea,” should be reclaimed as a cultural nationalist.<sup>22</sup>

### Buddha above and beyond nation

Han Yongun was not a Buddhist hermit living isolated from colonial society, concentrating on his Buddhist practice. Instead, he strove to reform Korean Buddhism to align with contemporary society, to popularize it among the ordinary people, and to put Buddhist thought into socio-political practice. His active participation in national politics is, however, widely misunderstood. Many find that Han’s Buddhism and ideas about national identity were conflated in the colonial context and that there was no collision between them in terms of ideal and goal. Still, he is assumed to have regarded national independence as taking precedence over everything else, including Buddhism, and as a Buddhist, to have done his best to serve his nation. Some even argue that he became a monk not for its own sake, but to disguise his true identity as a Korean, an independence activist (*tongnip chisa*) and an anti-Japanese fighter (*hang’il t’usa*).<sup>23</sup>

However, Han’s own voice questions and challenges the conventional portrayal of his Buddhism as a vehicle of national politics. In many of his Buddhist essays and speeches, in particular those written in the 1930s, he insisted on the strict separation between religion and politics (*chŏnggyo pulli*), arguing, “True Buddhism is only possible when it is free from all political

<sup>21</sup> See the chronological report of Han’s life: An Pyŏngjik 安秉直 (ed.), *Han Yongun* 韓龍雲 (Seoul: Hangilsa, 1980), pp.299-306.

<sup>22</sup> Han Yongun, “Chŏngmyŏnghan insik” 正明한 認識 in *Tong’a ilbo* (1 Jan. 1933).

<sup>23</sup> Ko Myŏngsu 高명수, “Chosŏn tongnip iyusŏ-e na’an Manhae-ŭi tongnip sasang” 조선독립이 유서에 나타난 만해의 독립사상 in *2001-Manhae ch’ukchŏn* 2001 만해추전 (Seoul: Pulgyo sidaesa, 2001), pp.378-380.

interference and restrictions".<sup>24</sup> His purpose was basically to criticize the colonial government's political control over the Korean *sangha* and intervention in Buddhist affairs through a set of regulations, the so-called Temple Ordinance. Therefore, his attempts to stay away from state politics and to achieve the self-management of the Buddhist *sangha* (although they practically failed) are often interpreted as expressing anti-Japanese nationalism at a religious level.<sup>25</sup> Still, it is too hasty to regard his stance on the separation between religion and politics as the same as anti-colonial nationalism, since my findings are that he also guarded Buddhism from the control and intervention of Korean nationalism in accordance with this same principle.

The first instance in which Han separates Buddhism from Korean nationalist politics is found in his essay "Nae-ga minnün Pulgyo" (The Buddhism I believe in, 1924), in relation to which I have already examined his emphasis on self-reliance as a feature of Buddhism. As he clearly states at the end of this essay, he advocates neither imperialism nor nationalism but Buddhism as the guiding principle for the present day and future age of Korea and the world.<sup>26</sup> He acknowledges that these two political ideologies wield enormous power in reality and dominate people's lives in his day. Yet he does not support using Korean nationalism to oppose imperialism. Nor does he criticize imperialism in order to defend Korean nationalism. Instead of accepting either imperialism or nationalism, he argues that neither is the all-surpassing truth. In his thought, Buddhism deserves to be the ultimate truth because it encompasses, surpasses and transcends all current opinions, ideologies and discourses.

Han explains that the true self of Buddha or the Buddha nature delivers the value of self-reliance. He attempts to seek the meaning of equality (*p'yŏngdŭng*) from the inherent Buddha nature that exists in all beings. Regarding the controversy over spiritualism (*yusimnon*) versus materialism (*yumullon*), he emphasizes that the Buddhist view of mind covers both spirit and body (the material world), or more exactly, transcends those theoretical distinctions. Above all, the Buddhist imperative of compassion (*chabi*) or salvation for all myriad things is to express, in modern terms, *pagae* (universal love, 博愛) and *hoje* (mutual aid, 互濟). He does not merely use contemporary terms in order to explain Buddhism but to claim that the transcendental Buddhism is neither unrealistic nor unearthly but realistic in the way it embraces and reconciles all the other socio-political ideas. In conclusion, he emphasizes that Buddhism can truly be the ultimate guide to all things.

<sup>24</sup> "Han Yongunsa-chŏnggyo pulli yŏksŏl" 韓龍雲師-政教分離力說 in *Tong'a ilbo* (27 March 1931).

<sup>25</sup> Pori Park, "Korean Buddhist Reforms and Problems in the Adoption of Modernity during the Colonial Period", pp.106-110; Pori Park, "A Korean Buddhist Response to Modernity", pp.29-32; Chŏng Kwangho 정광호, *Ilbon ch'imnak sigi-ŭi Han-Il Pulgyo kwangyesa* 일본침략시기의 한, 일 불교 관계사 (Seoul: Arŭmdaun sesang, 2001), pp.137-157.

<sup>26</sup> *Han Yongun chŏnjip* 2, p.289.

In this essay, Han does not directly propose the separation of Buddhism from politics as he did in later writings targeting the colonial state control, but shows his awareness that religious and political ideologies cannot be regarded as belonging to identical categories. Imperialism and nationalism are not perceived as oppositional but alike, as being both dominant political ideologies. In its relation to politics, Buddhism is placed as holding a position of central leadership and as of fundamental importance. This strongly implies that he rejects subservience of Buddhism to any socio-political ideology, even if it is nationalism. There is good reason to question the assumption that the national goal of independence was the most important matter in Han's life.

Han's vision of Buddhism as beyond and above political ideologies, and in particular Korean nationalism, is more polemically argued in a later interview titled "Han Yongunssi-wa Sökka-rül öham" 韓龍雲 씨와 釋迦를 語함 (An interview with Han Yongun: Talking about Shakyamuni, 1932).<sup>27</sup> This text is actually part of a collection of interviews conducted around a counterfactual idea: "If sages were reborn in Korea?" For a special January issue, the popular magazine *Samchölli* 三千里 asked Yi Kwangsu about Christ, An Chaehong about Confucius, and finally, Han Yongun about Shakyamuni. The focus of the interviews was to inquire whether these religious saints possessed patriotic love for their countries and what a religion can do for its country (in this case, the Korean nation). The first two intellectuals, Yi and An, answered that if Christ and Confucius had been born as Koreans in colonial Korea, they would have practically become a patriot or nationalist and would have tried above all to save their compatriots.<sup>28</sup> If Han Yongun had been a monk who regarded the nation as his first priority, he ought to have said the same thing. However, he thoroughly opposed the idea that Buddha should be a patriot serving the Korean nation.

The *Samchölli* reporter initiated the dialogue saying, "If Shakyamuni had been born in today's Korea and not in India 2400 years ago and had witnessed the pathetic sight of Korea, he would have immediately rushed to save the Koreans." He was pretty much convinced that "Buddha would have been an ardent nationalist and would have organized a secret organization. If not, he would have at least delivered speeches on the street or spread leaflets in the darkness".<sup>29</sup> The interviewer takes it for granted that the founder of Buddhism should be a savior of the Korean nation caught in the predicament of colonial rule, or at least as a nationalist who is willing to do anything for the nation's sake. The Buddha pictured by the interviewer precisely resembles the way Han is conventionally portrayed.

---

<sup>27</sup> Han Yongun was interviewed on December 9, 1931. This interview was published on January 1<sup>st</sup> 1932. When it was reprinted in the collected works, the title was changed to "The spirit of Shakyamuni." The date of publication was also wrongly given as 1931.

<sup>28</sup> "Taesöng-i onül Chosön-e t'aeönattamyön?" 大聖이 오늘 朝鮮에 태어났다면? in *Samch'ölli* (Jan.1932), pp.65-68.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p.69.

However, Han does not agree with the interviewer, remarking: "The historical Buddha transcended life and death as well as the distinction between sentient and insentient beings and time and space. In other words, he aimed at a universal revolution [transcending national boundaries]. He would not have striven for Korea only."<sup>30</sup> He does not say that the historical Buddha would have served the Korean nation, saved the Koreans from colonial hardship, and resolved all the problems surrounding colonial Korea. Nor does he deny the possibility that Buddha would have worked for the Korean people, either. He does not attempt to answer the question with either yes or no but problematizes the reporter's question itself. By emphasizing that the Buddha is a transcendent being whose universal and universe-oriented scope is beyond racial and national boundaries, he indicates that it is absurd to understand Buddha as a savior or nationalist for the sake of the Korean nation.

Finding Han's remark totally unexpected and incomprehensible, the interviewer retorts with a question whether Han means that the Buddha completely denied the existence of all national boundaries and borders and blood bonds. Historically considered, the reporter argues, Shakyamuni Buddha was born as an Indian. He wore Indian clothes, spoke Indian and wandered around among the Indians to preach Buddhism and save them from suffering. This being the case, the reporter asks, what was wrong with seeing Buddha as a savior of the Indian people and, further, of the Korean nation? Han responds that while it is true that Shakyamuni acted first of all to save the Indians when he embarked on his mission of salvation of mankind, that was because Indians were the nearest to him, not because he consciously selected the Indians out from among others such as the Turks, British, and Germans and intended to save only the Indians to the neglect of others.

Against the interviewer's insistence that something like national spirit or national identity existed in Buddha's mind, responding to historical conditions and circumstances, Han elucidates his previous argument that Buddha was beyond racial and national boundaries, transcended time and space, and was free from all bonds and distinctions. He thus implies that it is impossible to measure or even judge Buddha's spirit using the yardstick of patriotic nationalism. He makes it crystal clear that the focus of Buddha was on "myriad things" (*manyu*) in the universe, not on India or colonial Korea. What concerned him day and night was revolutionary change of the whole universe, not nationalist movements for the sake of a particular nation or country. Han's view runs counter to the strongly held politicized picture of Buddha as a national savior or a nationalist. Instead, he tenaciously describes Buddha as loyal to the religious vision of universal compassion.

Han's uncompromising view of Buddha as beyond and above the nation finally provokes anger in the interviewer, who asserts that it does not matter what Buddha's philosophy exactly was: what is important is its relation

---

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

to reality. The Koreans are now witnessing many great political convulsions and international developments such as the Manchurian invasion, the clash between Japan and China, the League of Nations, and friction among the great powers. In such a dire situation, the interviewer wonders if Buddha would have sat by as an idle spectator. He sarcastically questions of what avail it is to think of the morning star (Buddha attained enlightenment by looking up at the morning star), to contemplate life and death in a leisured manner and to show mercy to animals, trees, grasses and fishes. To him, such a Buddha is an unrealistic daydreamer and useless to colonial Korea.<sup>31</sup>

The interviewer's criticism of Han's view of Buddha and Buddhism is to some extent persuasive and compelling. In fact, Han was not an advocate of Buddhism for its own sake. As is widely known, he attempted to reform and secularize Buddhism to keep up with changes in society. In this interview, however, why is he so adamant that the founder of Buddhism would have not concerned himself with national and international affairs and not offered any help to the Koreans trying to cope with the difficulties that composed their reality? It may seem inconsistent on the face of it, but if one looks closely, consistency can be detected. Han regards Buddhist ideals and activity as most important, central and fundamental in relation to other ideologies. Thus, it is unacceptable to him if politics in the form of imperialism and nationalism imposes its dominant position upon Buddhism and makes use of it for political purposes.

Han discerns that the reporter's view of religion and reality is highly politicized and nation-centered. The Koreans and their national affairs are of utmost importance to the reporter. Other nations and countries and matters irrelevant to the Korean nation are regarded by the reporter as less important or even meaningless and useless. If religions are autonomous, they are condemned as unrealistic or anti-national; they should be subservient to national interests and goals. Han seriously questions this nationalist perspective on religions. Political movements or (socialist) revolution (*hyŏngmyŏng*) are of secondary importance. For Buddha preached about matters of higher relevance than politics; his teachings help us to realize that many things neglected and devalued by the limited nationalist viewpoint are not trivial and meaningless but no less important than the Korean nation and nationalism. In the light of Buddha's teaching, indeed, Koreans and their national affairs are not an urgent matter. By depicting Buddha as one who never loses sight of things outside the Korean nation, Han implicitly criticizes Korean nationalism for its own sake, which tends to be aggressive toward other values and practices, even though it is not his intention to reject its existence itself. This criticism of narrow-minded nationalism is also present elsewhere in his early writings, but this time he focuses more sharply on the relationship between Buddhism and nationalism and argues that Buddhism is not a political tool supporting whatever the

---

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p.70.

Koreans and their nationalism want. Rather, he maintains that Buddhism is first and foremost a universal religion of broader vision and scope and more fundamental than political ideologies and practices. It is also presented as having a crucial role in rectifying the wrong course of nationalism and inspiring insights going beyond nationalism.

The newspaper interview and “Nae-ga minnŭn Pulgyo” present one more important matter, namely, the relation between Han’s Buddhism and socialism. As the terms he uses, such as *yumullon* (materialism), *hyŏngmyŏng* (revolution), and *Pulgyo sahoejuŭi* (Buddhist socialism), indicate, Han was certainly aware of the newly arisen socialist or radical ideas in society. In this regard, Tikhonov and Miller have proffered an interesting argument: Han described Buddhism in terms acceptable to contemporary radicals and responded positively to socialist, anarchist, and communist criticism of imperialism and nationalism in the early 1920s.<sup>32</sup> According to them, there are other terms in the texts that also strongly allude to socialist, early communist ideas. The term mutual aid, for example, is argued by them as being popularly used among Korean anarchists. Han’s term “Buddhist socialism” is considered as crucial evidence of his affinity with socialist ideas, although they acknowledge that he never became either a Marxist or a communist.

Tikhonov and Miller’s argument is, however, somewhat tendentious and overstated where his affinity with socialism is concerned. What Han emphasized above all else in those essays is self-reliance as a characteristic of Buddhism, and this is a core concept that Korean cultural nationalists advocated in distinction to the socialist way of revolution. However, Tikhonov and Miller do not refer to this contradictory concept in their discussion. Contrary to their claims, the terms Han used to explain his Buddhist belief are not exclusively related to socialist ideas but also are widely and popularly used among many cultural nationalists in support of their idea of self-reconstruction.<sup>33</sup> For example, Yi Kwangsu heralded the whole world turning to democracy, mutual aid (*sangho pujo*, 相互扶助), gender equality, non-violence, mutual love (*sang’ae*, 相愛), and equality (*p’yŏngdŭng*). If history taught freedom and equality, all great religious men such as Shakyamuni, Confucius, Christ, Socrates, and Gandhi in unison taught love (*sarang*) and salvation of mankind from conflict and suffering.<sup>34</sup> There are more similarities between Han and cultural nationalists than between Han and the socialists.

It is worth noting that Han’s consideration of socialist ideas is primarily limited to economic matters. As he briefly summarizes in the newspaper interview, the intriguing term of socialist Buddhism refers to nothing else than Buddha’s economic views: Buddha rejected accumulating a fortune and

---

<sup>32</sup> Vladimir Tikhonov and Owen Miller, *Selected writings of Han Yongun*, pp.21-25.

<sup>33</sup> Pak Ch’ansŭng, *Han’guk kŭndae chŏngch’isasangsa yŏn’gu*, pp.176-185.

<sup>34</sup> Yi Kwangsu, “Minjok kaejoron” in *Yi Kwangsu chŏnjip* 10 李光洙全集 10 (Seoul: Samjungdang, 1971/1973), p.116; -----, “Sangjaeng-ŭi segye-esŏ sang’ae-ŭi segye-e” 相爭의 세계에서 相愛의 세계에 in *Kaebŏk* (Feb.1923). Republished in *Yi Kwangsu chŏnjip* 10, pp.173-176.

opposed economic inequality. Han sees that Buddha's economic ideal of living without a desire to possess has something in common with socialist ideas and expresses his intention to write a book about the topic later.<sup>35</sup> Nonetheless, the fact that he failed to do so may be more significant. He wrote no book nor even as much as a short article related to socialist Buddhism. He never explained why he did not and never mentioned the notion again in his writing. At any rate, it is an overemphasis to say that Han described Buddhism solely in tune with socialist or anarchist ideologies. In his thought, socialism is also one of many sociopolitical ideologies Buddhism could embrace, guide, and at the same time, surpass. One should not forget his insistence that political movements or "socialist revolution" are not what ultimately counts. The centerpiece of his thinking is not imperialism or nationalism or socialism but his Buddhist belief.

The same goes for Han Yongun's view of other religions like Ch'öndogyo. As is generally known, this religion was deeply involved in Korean nationalist movements. During the colonial period, it took a prominent place in launching national movements such as the March First Movement (1919). Its magazine *Kaeb'yŏk* 開闢 professed to be published on behalf of the entire Korean people.<sup>36</sup> Its leaders, Son Pyŏnghŭi 孫秉熙 and Ch'oe Rin 崔麟, were also recognized as nationalists up to the 1920s. Through his essay, "Ch'öndogyo-e taehan kamsang-gwa ch'ongmang" (天道教에 대한 感想과 囑望: Observations and suggestions regarding Ch'öndogyo, 1928),<sup>37</sup> Han expressed his deep concern over the politicization of the Ch'öndogyo organization. In his view, this religious group deviated from its original path by paying too much attention to nationalist movements. He made it clear that before anything else Ch'öndogyo is a religious group rather than a nationalist association. Although a religion cannot avoid secularization and socialization in these times, he argued, a religious organization should preserve its religious identity, lest it lose its power and disappear. Rather, Ch'öndogyo should more earnestly religionize itself. He did not oppose its social and nationalist participation itself but made his point clear: religion is the most important primary matter of all activities and therefore cannot be subordinated to politics.

### Collaboration during the second Sino-Japanese War?

Despite ideological differences, many scholars strongly believe that Han Yongun never compromised with Japanese imperialism (nor with Japanese Buddhism) and its acts of war and also tried to persuade Koreans not to yield to them. It is popularly assumed that he acted up to what he had in mind. His

<sup>35</sup> "Taesŏng-i onŭl Chosŏn-e t'aeŏnattamyŏn?", p.70.

<sup>36</sup> Kim Kŭnsu 김근수, *Han'guk chapchisa yŏn'gu* 한국잡지사연구 (Seoul: Han'gukhak yŏn'guso, 1992/2004), pp.108-113.

<sup>37</sup> *Sin in'gan* 20 新人間 20 (1928).

brave rejection of the civil registry requirement that he change his name into a Japanese one is reiterated as clear evidence for his uncompromising and unyielding nationalism. However, there have been some counterarguments which in some way tackle the above assumption. For example, Han's experience of short-term study in Japan (at a Japanese Buddhist university) had a strong influence on the development of his ideas about modernization of Buddhism. His Buddhist reform proposals were largely adopting the Japanese model, in particular his insistence on monks' marriage. In order to garner maximum support for such reformist demands, he appealed time and again to the colonial authorities. His attempts to reform and secularize the Korean *sangha* were not made in order to oppose the Japanese colonial government, for on the contrary, he ended up supporting the Government-General when it made similar attempts at reform.<sup>38</sup>

Recently, moreover, Ku Moryong has unearthed Han's collaborationist essay entitled "Sina sabyŏn-gwa Pulgyodo" 支那事變과 佛教徒 (The China Incident and Buddhists, 1937), wherein Han's attitude coincides with that of the wartime colonial government and he utterly justifies and supports Japan's war against China.<sup>39</sup> Ku himself has cited this essay simply as an example that does not match up with Han's nationalism, rather than as evidence of collaboration and concluded that Han's nationalism or worldview based upon his Buddhist philosophy might have shortcomings. Yet this essay has sparked controversy among scholars about the possibility of Han Yongun's collaboration.

This essay on its own is sufficient to debunk the strong belief that Han did not ever participate in collaboration. It can further endanger his reputation as a national hero because the nationalist myth does not allow any wrongdoing with regard to the nation. This essay therefore deserves more detailed scrutiny than it currently receives. But before doing so, one matter must be addressed first. This essay turns out to be an "unsigned" editorial of the magazine *Pulgyo*, which was probably written by its editor, Han. The nationalist scholarship which finds it hard to acknowledge that their national hero wrote such a piece of wartime propaganda does indeed tackle the question of authorship and even argues that someone else wrote it.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Hendrik H. Sørensen, "Buddhism and secular power in twentieth-century Korea," pp.132-137; Ku Moryong, "Manhae sasang-esŏi chayu-wa p'yŏngdŭng," pp.38, 49, and 54-56.

<sup>39</sup> "2004-Manhae ch'ukchŏn haksul semina nunkil kkŏn nonmun" 2004 만해추천 학술 세미나 논길 끈 논문 in *Pudap'ia* (13 Aug. 2004),

[http://buddhapia.com/\\_Service/\\_ContentView/EIC\\_CONTENT\\_2ASP?pk=0000760994&sub\\_pk=&cdss\\_cd=0002171397&menu\\_cd=&menu\\_code=000004225&top\\_menu\\_cd=0000000287&sub\\_menu=](http://buddhapia.com/_Service/_ContentView/EIC_CONTENT_2ASP?pk=0000760994&sub_pk=&cdss_cd=0002171397&menu_cd=&menu_code=000004225&top_menu_cd=0000000287&sub_menu;) Pak Suyŏn 박수연, "Hwaŏmjŏk p'yŏngdŭng-ŭi minjok-kwa segye" 화엄적 평등의 민족과 세계 in *Manhaehak yŏn'gu* 2, p.64.

<sup>40</sup> "Yŏm Muung chakka hoeŭi isajang, chigŭm pundan ch'eje-ga mopsi hŭndŭllinŭn chung": chakka hoeŭi Manhae sasang silch'ŏn sŏnyanghoe chuch'oe kwangbok 60-chunyŏn kinyŏm haksul semina" 업무용 작가회의 이사장 "지금 분단체제가 몹시 흔들리는 중": 작가회의 만해사상실천선양회 주최 광복 60주년 기념 학술 세미나 in *Han'guk chakka hoeŭi* 한국작가회의 (20 Aug. 2005),

[http://www.hanjak.or.kr/zboard/zboard.php?id=allimpress&page=8&sn1=&divpage=1&sn=off&ss=on&sc=on&select\\_arrange=headnum&desc=asc&no=510](http://www.hanjak.or.kr/zboard/zboard.php?id=allimpress&page=8&sn1=&divpage=1&sn=off&ss=on&sc=on&select_arrange=headnum&desc=asc&no=510).



However, according to Im Hyebyong, when the Buddhist organ, *Pulgyo*, was reissued from March 1937 onwards, its advisory editor Han Yongun took full charge of it (even though another monk Hŏ Yŏngho was appointed as chief editor and publisher) and wrote unsigned editorials from the first to the 17<sup>th</sup> volume (March 1937 to November 1938), among which is the problematic editorial of the seventh volume.<sup>41</sup> Han wrote the editorial but it remained unsigned. In view of his signed editorials of the same magazine in early 1930s, it becomes clear that he intentionally did not sign the later editorial. By doing so, he probably intended to show that the editorial was billed as the media's official opinions rather than his personal opinions. Nonetheless, this does not mean that he had no or indirect responsibility for that, as some scholars argue. Regarding anonymous editorials, the key should not be authorship but editorship. Han's unequivocal editorship thus means direct and full responsibility for the controversial editorial.

Then, what is exactly articulated in the editorial concerned? How controversial is it? Han probably wrote this one-page editorial and certainly published it under his editorship in October 1937, a few months after the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War. He first laments the military confrontation between China and Japan. He then adds that an increase in military forces and military training is not the right policy of a country regardless of purpose. This may sound like a pacifist or anti-militarist claim. However, it is not offered in opposition to war or militarism. His critique on the preparation for war and war mobilization targets only the Chinese side. Japanese military action is tolerated and even worse, supported by the author. He states, "The incident is caused and exacerbated by the Chinese's misjudgment of international affairs and their wrong policy of digging their own grave in belittling and resisting Japan."<sup>42</sup> He blames the Chinese government for initiating the war, misjudging the intentions of Japan, and underestimating and defying the Japanese empire.

The author's remarks are probably based upon manipulated news. The colonial government made an official statement that the Chinese military troops initiated the military clash and Japan only reacted to them. But the truth was that the Japanese army provoked the Chinese by detonating a bomb nearby the South Manchurian Railway. Whether the news was manipulated or not, if Han had viewed militarism itself critically from a pacifistic point of view as he had done in his earlier treatise "*Chosŏn tongnib-ŭi sŏ*" 朝鮮獨立의 書 (A letter on the independence of Korea, 1919), he would have criticized the military actions of both Japan and China. Instead, the author now applies a double standard *contra* China and *pro* Japan. His earlier anti-war and anti-militarist view targeting both Germany and the allied forces has turned into war propaganda

---

<sup>41</sup> Im Hyebyong 임혜봉, *Ch'inil süngnyŏ 108-in: Kkŭnnaji anŭn yŏksa-ŭi murŭm* 친일승려 108인: 끝나지 않은 역사의 물음 (Seoul: Ch'ŏngnyŏnsa, 2005), pp.440-441.

<sup>42</sup> Han Yongun *chŏnjip* 2, p.359.

in this later writing that celebrates Japan's military punishment of China which is portrayed as the belligerent party.

Han's notions of the imperial mission for peace in Asia (*tongyang p'yŏnghwa*, 東洋平和), the future of the Asian races, the unification of minds, and the promotion of imperial glory are not meant to express pacifism in Asia or the world but are a useful rhetoric for justifying the war waged by Japan. Some scholars are apt to interpret his mention of peace in the literal sense of the word and jump to the conclusion that he was a pacifist or pacifist nationalist. Some go further and argue that he should be seen as an (Pan-)Asianist rather than a nationalist, one whose concern for peace went beyond colonial Korea.<sup>43</sup> However, they fail to take into account the historical context of the time, when peace in Asia or world peace often was used in wartime propaganda, and do not question whether there is any difference between Han's articulations and the war rhetoric.

As far as his early treatise "Chosŏn tongnib-ŭi sŏ" is concerned, Han himself was clearly aware of the fact that in a manner similar to other expansionist great powers, Japan declared peace in Asia and the autonomy and prosperity of Chosŏn Korea as reasons for its warfare, as clearly articulated in its treaties with Korea during the wars against China (1894-1895) and Russia (1905), and that it claimed to be a peacekeeper. However, he denounced this as rhetoric designed to mask its desire to occupy countries like Korea and to treat the occupied people as slaves.<sup>44</sup> Against this rhetoric, he insisted on world peace, pacifism and justice in its true sense from the occupied people's point of view. However, the notions expressed in his later essay are neither more nor less than the wartime ideology the Japanese empire propagated. He reproduced what he had previously condemned: the role of the Japanese imperial army as a peacekeeper in Asia and as a fighter for justice and the future of the Asian races, and so on. Of course, he was not alone in this effort. Many Korean collaborationist Buddhists also gave speeches on "For world peace," "Spirit of peace in Asia," "The China Incident and Asian peace," and "Asian peace and the duty of the civilians" in support of Japanese expansionism and the Japanese invasion of China.<sup>45</sup>

More striking in this later essay is that Han rebukes China's "resistance" to Japan because he thinks it is the wrong policy: "Regardless of motivations, it is not the right way for a country [China] to make a national policy of expulsion or contempt targeting another country [Japan] and to educate and train their people to attain this goal."<sup>46</sup> Whatever Han himself meant, the actual "motivations" of China were a desire to defend the nation

---

<sup>43</sup> Pak Suyŏn, "Hwaŏmjŏk p'yŏngdŭngŭi minjokkwa segye," pp.75-78; Kim Kibong 김기봉, "21-segi Manhae Han Yongun-ŭi 'nim' -ŭn nuguinga?" 21세기 만해 한용운의 '님'은 누구인가? in *Manhaehak yŏn'gu* 3:55-77.

<sup>44</sup> *Han Yongun chŏnjip* 1, p.346.

<sup>45</sup> Im Hyebyong, *Ch'inil sŭngnyŏ 108-rin*, pp.409, 461, 462, 487 and 468.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

against Japanese aggression and halt Japan's expansion in the region. The Chinese definition of the Second Sino-Japanese War was a war of resistance against Japan.<sup>47</sup> Simply on straightforward logical grounds one would expect of a Korean independence fighter that he would endorse Chinese resistance movements and condemn Japanese imperial power. In his editorial, however, far from supporting anti-Japanese movements in China as well as China's desire to maintain national unity and independence, he condemns them.

The author's critique of China concludes with a more direct glorification of the Japanese empire. He insists that it is the duty of people on the home front (*ch'onghu kungmin*, 銃後國民) to show "gratitude" to imperial soldiers (most of them Japanese at that moment) for their thoroughgoing punishment of (stubborn) China.<sup>48</sup> He particularly urges Buddhists in colonial Korea to pray for the soldiers' health and victory. Calling for the proper attitude and readiness as "Japanese nationals" (*ilbon kungmin*, 日本國民), he insists on keen awareness of the national emergency and of the future of the Asian race. In this editorial, Han does not utter a word about either the Korean nation (*Chosŏn minjok*) or Koreans (*Chosŏnin*). The readers who are supposed to be Koreans and Buddhists are re-designated as "Japanese nationals" and "imperial servants on the home front." This re-designation does not simply change the language but the entire discourse in line with the wartime policy of assimilation designed to turn the Koreans into loyal subjects of the Japanese Emperor. Under the banner of *naissen ittai* 內鮮一體 (Japan and Korea are One Body), for example, the Koreans were forced to assimilate into Japanese culture and adopt its language, religion, spirit, and customs while extirpating Korean identity, language, and culture.

It is noteworthy that Han's editorial is eerily analogous with those written by prominent pro-Japanese monks. During the same period, Kim T'aehŭp 金泰洽 published a series of essays in the Buddhist newspaper, *Pulgyo sibo* 佛教時報, asserting that since China initiated this war of aggression, it should be punished by Japan and encouraging Buddhists to support and show patriotism toward Japan and the imperial army.<sup>49</sup> He further asserted that the punishment of perfidious China was aimed at establishing eternal peace in Asia. He in particular called Japan "our country" (*aguk*) and the Koreans *kungmin* (a term meaning nationals, but used to mean "Japanese nationals") and called upon them to practice loyalty and render service to the country of Japan. He emphasized that "we, Japanese citizens," should strive for spiritual mobilization and lead religious lives for that purpose.<sup>50</sup>

---

<sup>47</sup> Joseph W. Esherick, "Ten Theses on the Chinese Revolution" in *Modern China* 21.1 (Jan.1995), pp.51,53, and 66; Wen-Hsin Yeh, "Dai Li and the Liu Geqing Affair: Heroism in the Chinese Secret Service During the War of Resistance" in *The Journal of Asian Studies* 48.3 (August 1989):545-562, pp.545, 550 and 551; Peter Duus, *Modern Japan* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998), p.222.

<sup>48</sup> Han Yongun *chŏnjip* 2, p.359.

<sup>49</sup> "Aeguk sasang-gwa kyŏngsin sungbul" 愛國思想과 敬神崇佛 in *Pulgyo sibo* (Oct. 1937).

<sup>50</sup> "Pisang siguk-kwa sinang saenghwal" 非常時局과 信仰生活 in *Pulgyo sibo* (Nov. 1937).

Kwŏn Sangno 權相老, who had been a prominent scholar-monk but later became one of the active pro-Japanese monks, also condemned China for its misjudgment of the situation and sided with Japan during the Second Sino-Japanese War. In his essay “Sidae kaksŏng-ŭi p’irysŏng 時代 覺醒의 必要性 (The necessity of a keen awareness of the times, 1937), he argued that the Chinese should have cooperated with the Japanese empire for the sake of peace in Asia but that instead they destroyed themselves and brought danger to Japan and Asia as well. So, it was natural for “our” Japanese empire to harbor animosity against China in the face of the danger; and it was proper for Japan to punish the Chinese aggressor. Kwŏn also called for a keen awareness of the national emergency and declared that not only soldiers but people on the home front should be ready to support the war effort in their daily activities.

Evidently, what those collaborating monks stated in the same period is surprisingly identical to each of Han Yongun’s arguments. It is probably so because those essays and speeches did not need to be creative but merely follow the dictates of the colonial government. Given that an editorial would undergo careful scrutiny by the colonial censors, there would have been a need to appease the censors, too. As he intentionally showed by not signing it, the collaborative text was not to express his personal opinion but rather to represent the stance of the *Pulgyo* magazine as an institution. In other words, it was not what he personally thought and wanted to write but what he officially had to write in order to be able to run the official magazine of Korean Buddhism in a difficult situation where its survival was impossible without collaboration. Nonetheless, even if it was his “helpless” compliance as a means not his goal or true intention, this cannot entirely take away the taint of pro-Japanese collaboration. He cannot avoid responsibility for the collaborationist essay he wrote as a magazine chief. He may have been in the same shoes as many of his peers: alleged collaborators just trying to rescue their Korean organizations and institutions by willingly or unwillingly following the colonial government’s policies.

### **A heroic Buddha and the martial spirit**

The issue of Han’s relevance to pro-Japanese collaboration is a complicated matter which cannot be judged by one or two texts. As some scholars point out, it is important to explore whether Han continued to draw up collaborationist documents. Is this collaborationist editorial “exceptional” or are there more texts related to the issue of his collaboration? Scholars tend to jump to the conclusion that there are no more collaborationist texts written by Han Yongun and that this editorial is too exceptional in the light of the consistent nationalism shown throughout his life. However, the sources used to buttress the myth of Han’s ideological consistency are limited primarily to his earliest canonical

texts,<sup>51</sup> and therefore it is of utmost importance to examine his later works (from the 1930s onward), which to date have been largely neglected, and to check whether Han maintained a consistent uncompromising nationalist stance in the later period or he continued to produce collaborationist texts like the editorial examined above.

In none of his later work did Han call for an explicit nationalism or actively support the colonial government. He mainly discussed issues and problems in Buddhism without mentioning specific political events or circumstances. However, on closer inspection, one can detect that many of his Buddhist texts convey significant messages of which social and political implications lead us to question the issue of collaboration once more. One of the prominent examples is the recurring image of Buddha as a heroic fighter that occurs in his 1930s writing particularly in the form of editorials (mostly signed). The Buddha is popularly known as an awakened and compassionate saint, who attained complete insight into the cause of suffering and the truth of the universe and tried to save all living beings. Strangely, however, Han highlights Buddha as a great hero who punishes and triumphs over evil rather than as a merciful Buddha and stresses his ferocious, fearless, and brave fighting spirit rather than compassion.

For example, in “Ch’ulbalchöm” 出發點 (Point of Departure, 1932), Han states: “Our Buddha embodies great compassion and great kindness (*taeja taebi*, 大慈大悲) but at the same time, he was also known for his great strength, the highest prowess and fearlessness (*taeung taeryōk taemuoe*, 大雄大力大無畏).”<sup>52</sup> He further explains that Buddha practiced forbearance (*inyok*, 忍辱) for the purpose of leading living beings to the path of enlightenment but had to exhibit extraordinary courage and a fighting spirit to vanquish evil. In this editorial, Han does not deny the validity of Buddha’s popular image as a compassionate savior of all living beings. He still reveres Buddha’s well-known characteristics of compassion and forbearance. However, he certainly rehabilitates the lesser known image of Buddha to the public as a heroic and fearless warrior. The focus of his message is clearly more on Buddha’s fearless fighting spirit and prowess than his mind filled with compassion.

This is not an editorial in which Han intended to elucidate a Buddha’s spiritual qualities –compassionate, powerful, fearless– in a conventional sense. The example of Buddha is basically cited by him to support the central message he clearly proclaims in the very beginning of the essay: “there is only one thing for us [Koreans/Korean Buddhists] to do in our life: advance and never retreat”.<sup>53</sup> In this essay, he discusses how to live in the 1930s colonial society and emphasizes a life with bellicose spirit and behavior as the historical Buddha

---

<sup>51</sup> *Chosŏn Pulgyo yusillon* 朝鮮佛教維新論 (1913), “Chosŏn tongnib-ŭi sŏ” 朝鮮獨立의 書 (1919), and *Nim-ŭi ch’immuk* 님의 沈默 (1926).

<sup>52</sup> *Hoegwang* 2 回光 2 (March 1932). Republished in *Han Yongun chŏnjip* 2, p.363.

<sup>53</sup> *Han Yongun chŏnjip* 2, p.363.

himself showed. When facing obstacles, in his own words, such as the devil (*ma*, 魔) or the enemy (*chŏk*), one should vanquish them at the risk of one's life and charge (*tolchin*) toward one's original purpose. According to him, retreat is not an option in one's life. This is argued by him as the correct view of life and the appropriate course of conduct for the people in colonial Korea.

In his editorials such as "P'yŏngbŏm" 平凡 (Ordinary, 1937), Han reiterates that Buddhist practice is always attended by evil events (*map'yŏn*, 魔便).<sup>54</sup> Evil spirits constantly appear as obstacles to meditation and awakening, because the evil and wicked (*sama*, 邪魔) detest the correct law of Buddha (*chŏngpŏp*, 正法).<sup>55</sup> Nonetheless, such difficulties make strenuous adherence to the principle of "no retreat and no surrender" all the more praiseworthy. According to him, this is not merely confined to Buddhist affairs. Secular matters are viewed as the same. In the fulfillment of personal goals, one cannot help but encounter obstacles and ordeals. People in colonial societies, particularly, are regarded as being beset by adversity. These, he exhorts to be brave and courageous.<sup>56</sup> Following the example set by Buddha, they should not be defeated by, but on the contrary defeat evils, enemies and obstacles. They should be armed with strong fearless courage and be prepared to move forward.<sup>57</sup>

This heroic and fearless Buddha is not an arbitrary distortion. Nor does the image occur solely in Han's Buddhist writing. As his long essay "Chŏngjin" 精進 (Endeavor, 1937) shows, Buddhist scriptures already contain many references to such images of Buddha.<sup>58</sup> Han thus rediscovered the motif of great heroism, that is, courage, prowess and fearlessness, which was exhibited by the Buddha in the existing Buddhist texts and refashioned it for the contemporary reality of colonial Korea. As the title of the essay indicates, the Buddhist notion of *chŏngjin* (endeavor) or *yongmaeng chŏngjin*, (勇猛精進, fearless effort) particularly features the event of enlightenment in which Buddha with dauntless will subjugated the evil spirit of Māra, thrust away temptation, and achieved great wisdom.<sup>59</sup> The historical Buddha was a man of great valour (*tae yongmaeng*, 大勇猛) who had no fear of life or death and countenanced no retreat and no surrender.<sup>60</sup> The Buddhist practitioners therefore should re-enact Shakyamuni Buddha's conquest of Māra and his subsequent enlightenment. This is a ritual still practiced in Sŏn (Zen) monasteries and called *yongmaeng chŏngjin* (fearless effort), whereby Sŏn monks engage in "intensive meditation," going without sleep for seven straight days.<sup>61</sup>

---

<sup>54</sup> *Pulgyo: sin* 佛教: 新 (July 1937).

<sup>55</sup> "So-in-gwa kunja" 小人과 君子 in *Pulgyo* (May 1933).

<sup>56</sup> "Yongja-ga toera" 勇者が 되라 in *Pulgyo* (Jan. 1932).

<sup>57</sup> "Nun-ül tŭrŏ mŏlli pora" 눈을 들어 멀리 보라 in *Pulgyo: sin* (April 1937).

<sup>58</sup> *Pulgyo: sin* 6 (August 1937). Republished in *Han Yongun chŏnjip* 2, pp.329-332.

<sup>59</sup> *Han Yongun chŏnjip* 2, p.329.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p.330.

<sup>61</sup> Robert E. Buswell, *The Zen monastic experience: Buddhist practice in contemporary Korea* (Princeton

Han's attempts to recall Buddha's conquest of Māra and to emphasize the warrior aspect of the Buddha are associated particularly with Japanese militarism in the colonial context. He himself took the Buddhist idea and applied it to colonial society, emphasizing its secular meaning of "go ahead and no retreat." This main message as well as the words he uses in his essays such as enemy (*chōk*), devil (*angma*), evil spirit, surrender, vanquish (*hangbok*), conquer (*t'oech'i*), and move forward (*toljin*) are rather military terms than Buddhist terms and strongly remind us of a series of Japanese military operations throughout the 1930s, from the Manchurian Incident (1931) and to the outbreak of the total war against China (1937). As baldly described in one of his editorials, Buddha is envisioned less as a compassionate savior than as a brave military warrior bearing a sharp sword.<sup>62</sup> This man encounters evil foes on his way to enlightenment, beheads them, and destroys the false. His prowess and fighting spirit bespeak soldierly morale, as his vanquishing and beheading of the enemy represent soldierly conduct. Such a heroic Buddha, while saving all living beings, evokes images of the soldiers of Japanese imperial army who fight against evils like China on the way to the Asian continent at that time.

It is no coincidence that Han's statements are not really different from those of many Buddhist leaders who supported the Japanese military aggression. From the early Meiji period on, Japanese military and Buddhist leaders actively incorporated Buddhism into Japanese war efforts and advertised Buddhism as the very heart of Japanese nationalism. In the 1930s, under the banner of imperial or nation-protecting Buddhism, they sanctioned and justified Japan's military operations, including the Manchurian Incident (1931) and the second Sino-Japanese War (1937). The Greater East Asian War (Pacific War, 1941) was justified as a holy war of compassion, a mission to punish formidable enemies such as China and the West and to contribute to the salvation of justice, progress, humanity, and peace.<sup>63</sup>

Zen, in particular, was reconstructed and heavily emphasized as the true spirit of Japanese militarism and as the martial spirit of warriors represented by Bushidō. As D.T. Suzuki's explained, Zen goes well with the fighting spirit. The fighter should be single-minded with one object in view: to fight, looking neither backward nor sidewise. To go straight forward in order to crush the enemy.<sup>64</sup> This explanation is eerily similar to Han's editorials discussed above. Shakyamuni Buddha's heroism when conquering demons was frequently rediscovered to heighten support for Japan's imperial wars and boost military morale. For example, one of the most committed Zen supporters

---

University Press, 1992), pp.187-189.

<sup>62</sup> "Taeryōk" 大力 in *Pulgyo* (April 1933). Republished in *Han Yongun chōnjip* 2, p.356.

<sup>63</sup> Robert H. Sharf, "The Zen of Japanese Nationalism" in *Curators of the Buddha: The study of Buddhism under colonialism*, edited by Donald S. Lopez, Jr. (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1995); Brian Daizen Victoria, *Zen at War* (Oxford: Rowman&Littlefield Publishers, 2006).

<sup>64</sup> Cited from Brian Victoria, *Zen war stories* (London & New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), p.25.

of Japan's military actions, Harada Daiun Sōgaku, insisted: "Buddha Shakyamuni himself had conquered demons in the course of realizing enlightenment. Thus, without plunging into the war arena, it is totally impossible to know the Buddha Dharma."<sup>65</sup>

It is no surprise that some more years later when there was actual war with China and the West and the Koreans were drafted to help the Japanese war effort, pro-Japanese Korean monks also cited notions similar to Han's in their collaborationist writings. In his essay "Sigukha Chosŏn Pulgyodo-ŭi immu" 時局下朝鮮佛教徒의任務 (The duty of Korean Buddhists in a state of national emergency, 1940), Kwŏn Sangno noted that Buddha defeated evil forces and temptations before attaining enlightenment and urged Buddhists on the home front to whole heartedly live for the state, as Buddha did. Kwŏn also insisted that, in light of Buddhist teachings, it was natural that young monks volunteer to serve the militaries of their countries.<sup>66</sup> In the same year, he wrote another essay in which he cited many more examples of Buddhism's association with militarism such as Shakyamuni's role as a warrior protecting his country and Korean monks such as Sōsan and Samyŏng who defended Chosŏn Korea by gathering warrior monks.<sup>67</sup> Of course, the ironic fact that these Korean monks actually fought against Japanese was glossed over in his essay. The Buddhist concept of *chŏngjin* or *yongmaeng chŏngjin* was emphasized by Kwŏn, too, in his case explicitly, as a morale booster for imperial soldiers.<sup>68</sup> He argued, "on a battlefield, one has no choice but to go forward. Retreat is not allowed....The best example of *yongmaeng chŏngjin* is to be fearless of a curtain of fire, to break through the enemy line, and go onwards and onwards. This heroic act of *yongmaeng chŏngjin* represents loyalty and justice and enables the building of eternal life and history. National loyalty and devotion (to the Japanese emperor) are equal to the attainment of enlightenment".<sup>69</sup>

Whether Han was aware or not, his description of Buddha as a conqueror of evil, a warrior who was fearless and, therefore, would not retreat, is uncomfortably close to the distorted interpretations of Buddhism presented by both Japanese and Korean war-supporting Buddhists. Of course, Han's Buddhist articulations are not as strong and obvious as theirs. He never directly stated that the evils and enemies referred to China. Nor did he directly mention that he supported Japanese military aggression as the collaborationist Buddhists did. His Buddhist articulations cannot be seen as a kind of wartime

<sup>65</sup> Brian Daizen Victoria, *Zen at War*, pp.136-137.

<sup>66</sup> *Pulgyo: sin* 25. Quoted from Im Hyebong 임혜봉, *Ch'inil Pulgyoron: sang* 친일불교론: 上 (Seoul: Minjoksa, 1993), pp.287-289.

<sup>67</sup> "Sūngnyō chiwŏnbyōng-e taehaya" 僧侶志願兵에 대하여 in *Pulgyo sibo* 57 (Jan. 1940). Cited from *Ch'inil Pulgyoron: sang*, pp.298-300.

<sup>68</sup> Kwŏn Sangno 權相老, "Hanbŏn k'ūge chungnŭn chŏngsin, yŏngwŏn pulmyŏr-ŭi saengmyŏng-ŭn ch'ūng-esŏ nanda" 한번 크게 죽는 精神, 永遠不滅의 生命은 '患'에서 난다 in *Maeil sinbo* (29 Nov. 1943). Republished in *Haktoyŏ sŏngjŏng-e nasŏra* 학도여 성전에 나서라, Edited by Chŏng Unhyŏn (Seoul: Ōpsŏjji annŭn iyagi, 1997), pp.66-71.

<sup>69</sup> *Haktoyŏ sŏngjŏng-e nasŏra*, pp.70-71.



propaganda because in the early and mid-1930s when he wrote those Buddhist essays, Japan had some military clashes with China, not an actual war and no aggressive wartime campaigns directly mobilizing the Koreans. Nonetheless, it is clear that he was far from being an anti-military pacifist, anti-Japanese, and uncompromising monk. The Buddhist examples in association with militarism he highlighted prove that he basically followed the colonial state's lead instead of resisting it and shared the insights of collaborationist Buddhists, even in a time when the economic, political and military efforts of the colonial authorities failed to draw full attention and support from the Korean men.<sup>70</sup>

Seeing that Han has been too much romanticized as a faultless and uncompromising national hero, it is important to explore his behavior and conviction tinged with collaboration and challenge false assumptions about him. However, the conventional practice in reaction to pro-Japanese collaboration, namely, labeling someone as pro-Japanese, retrospectively downgrading all his previous thoughts, writings, and activities, and pouring out all sorts of criticism, is no way to settle the controversy. Han's literature with collaboration tendencies needs to be explored afresh from a postcolonial perspective and in the context of the complicated and nuanced interactions with the colonial government and its dominant discourse.<sup>71</sup> Collaboration was not his only reaction to colonial reality in a later period. There are more subtle subtexts in his writing which are divergent from or even subversive of colonial policies or ideologies.

The bottom line here is that while compromising with the colonial overlord, Han also imparts another message that people in colonial Korea despite adverse conditions should persistently and unyieldingly work at their goals until they are fulfilled, alluding, implicitly and explicitly, to national movements of the Koreans. Throughout his essays, he talks about obstacles and ordeals the Koreans faced in their lives. Yet, he does not specify further what kind of adversity it was. It is probably due to the intensified censorship, but I think that the specification was not necessary to his readers because they were the ones who experienced adversity by themselves and therefore already knew what the obstacles connoted. By taking the contemporary state of Korean Buddhism as an example, however, we can approximately estimate what obstacles prevailed in the 1930s when Han composed various Buddhist essays.

As revealed by a series of articles in *Pulgyo*, Korean Buddhism faced a deadlock in the early 1930s.<sup>72</sup> The author of the articles analyzed six factors

<sup>70</sup> Carter J. Eckert et al., *Korea Old and New: A History* (Harvard University Press, 1990), pp.305-306.

<sup>71</sup> Kyeong-Hee Choi, "Another Layer of the Pro-Japanese Literature: Ch'oe Chŏnghŭi's "The Wild Chrysanthemum"" in *POETICA* 52 (1999): 61-87; Han Suyŏng 한수영, *Ch'inil munhag-ŭi chaeinsik* 친일문학의 재인식 (Seoul: Somyŏng ch'ulp'an, 2005); Kim Yangsŏn 김양선, *Kŭndae munhag-ŭi t'alsingminsŏng-gwa chendŏ chŏngch'ihak* 근대문학의 탈식민성과 젠더정치학 (Seoul: Yŏngnak 역락, 2009); Yun Taesŏk 윤대석, *Singminji kungmin munhak non* 식민지 국민문학론 (Seoul: Yŏngnak, 2006).

<sup>72</sup> Mongjŏngsaeng 夢庭生, "Wigi-e chingmyŏnhan Chosŏn Pulgyo-ŭi wŏnin koch'al" 危機에 直面한 朝鮮佛教의 原因考察 in *Pulgyo* (Oct. 1932) and *Pulgyo* (Nov. 1932).

leading to the desperate condition of Korean Buddhism. Among them, three external influences are particularly worth noting. The central organization of Korean Buddhism was in heavy debt and was about to shut down. According to the author, it was not only the Korean temples but the whole of Korean society was in economic hardship and its economy had literally collapsed in the Great Depression (1929). The second external reason was the ideological crisis. The Korean public and Korean Buddhism were in a chaotic situation in which communism, anachronism, anti-religious movement flooded into their country, all kinds of new religions arose and those ideologies confronted with each other. The third reason was the temple ordinance (*sach'allyŏng*). Although the state regulation of religion was rejected in Japan because it was against the Constitution, the colonial government enforced this law in colonial Korea under the pretext of protecting the Korean Buddhism. However, it turned out to bring the Buddhist institution under their direct control and caused problems in Korean Buddhism such as the government-appointed abbots' abuse of power.

Likewise, there was an increasing turbulence in economic, ideological, and political environments which badly affected people's life and livelihood. Koreans were disoriented in their personal and public lives. This also seriously influenced their national agenda. As Adrian Buzo succinctly observes, the 1930s was a period in which the long-desired national goal of independence had started to look unlikely to Koreans, whose lives were becoming more and more integrated with the colonial system. As preparations for war got underway, even mild expressions of nationalism or socialism were harshly suppressed by the colonial government.<sup>73</sup> All Korean institutions and associations were on the eve of either shutdown or reconstruction into imperial organizations. Under such circumstances, people in colonial Korea came to lose sight of their original goal of national independence.

Perceiving that Koreans faced obstacles in their lives and began to see their national goal of independence as a far-fetched or impossible dream, Han encouraged them not to let the obstacles defeat them and reminded them not to forget their beginnings, lose sight of their ideals and original plans and purposes, or change direction. The recurrent theme of Buddha's heroism and his fighting spirit of "go forward and no retreat" that relates to his collaboration with Japanese military effort also enables this subtle counter-discourse. The Way of Bodhisattva which he tellingly revisited and discussed as the way to cope with colonial life in the 1930s is another example of counter-discourse. Among six paramitas (*yukp'aramil*, 六波羅蜜) constituting the quintessential of the Bodhisattva Way,<sup>74</sup> Han particularly singled out the practice of *chŏngjin* for that purpose.

---

<sup>73</sup> Adrian Buzo, *The Making of Modern Korea* (London and New Work: Routledge, 2002), pp.38-49.

<sup>74</sup> The six paramitas are generous giving, precept observation, forbearance, endeavor, meditation and wisdom.

As Han explains in his essay “Chǒngjin” (1937), *chǒngjin* appears everywhere in the Buddhist scriptures, connoting perseverance, zeal, diligence, great valor, and non-negligence. He explains that this practice of perseverance is ranked as the fourth among the six paramitas and therefore, one might think that this virtue has a low priority. However, he emphasizes that it is not true. The paramitas are not ranked in the order of priority. They are all equally important. He further argues that this practice of *chǒngjin* turns out to be the very essence of a bodhisattva’s practice and thus the most fundamental.<sup>75</sup> Without this virtue, he argues, it is impossible to fulfill other paramitas and to achieve the ultimate Buddhist goal. Its importance is not limited to Buddhism only. He sees it as a crucial element of success in all secular affairs. In a more secular sense, this Buddhist concept is defined as referring to the unyielding and invincible spirit engaged in sustained and ceaseless effort.<sup>76</sup> He argues that all things are attended by obstacles and challenges and without this spirit of tenacity, one cannot overcome them and comes to relinquish one’s goal and dream. Although great religious leaders, successful businessmen, and great inventors did not believe in Buddhism and never heard of *chǒngjin*, he sees that they all demonstrated this spirit of tenacity and made unprecedented and matchless achievements in their fields despite adversities.

Given the intensified censorship, Han never directly stated what adversity the Koreans faced, the growing political repression imposed by the Japanese government, and the massive withdrawal from Korean national movements. Also, he never directly insisted that people in colonial Korea should maintain ceaseless efforts toward their national goals and exhibit unyielding spirit. He was clever enough to stick to acceptable words under colonial censorship. He rather chose to express his thoughts and wishes to his compatriots indirectly and figuratively. His poetic expressions illustrate snow, cold wind and winter as an allegory of the predicament of the Koreans and highlight plum blossom as a symbol of tenacity and perseverance.<sup>77</sup> In this symbolic way, he pronounces that in whatever predicament the Koreans find themselves, they should continue tenaciously and courageously along the path they have chosen and aimed for success.

Han uses anecdotes and proverbs to deliver this subversive message. In “Ch’oehu-ŭi obun’gan” 最後의 五分間 (The last five minutes, 1935), for example, he cites Liang Qichao’s experience.<sup>78</sup> When Liang’s *coup d’état* failed and he crossed to America, Liang met a famous entrepreneur who had a five-minute rule in meetings: “Success relies on the last five minutes.” To Han, this adage explains the very meaning of *chǒngjin*. All undertakings tend to start with adversity and, accordingly, are accompanied by difficulties, which mean that

---

<sup>75</sup> Han Yongun *chǒnjip* 2, p.333.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid, p.335.

<sup>77</sup> “Maehwa” 梅花 in *Pulgyo* (Jan. 1933); “Pomŭi sado” 봄의 使徒 in *Pulgyo* (March 1933).

<sup>78</sup> *Chogwang* 朝光 (Feb. 1935).

one should not be discouraged or give up if, having completed half a task, success has not yet been achieved. He insists that people (in colonial Korea) not change course at the very last moment, as this would go against their real intentions and would not result in success. He even scares them, saying that those who do not maintain ceaseless efforts toward their goals and exhibit no unyielding spirit will only taste defeat and sorrow throughout their lives. The five-minute rule is aimed to encourage Koreans to bravely suffer the difficulties necessary to obtain the initial (national) goals they set themselves in the beginning.

In the conventional view, Han is strongly assumed having nothing to do with collaboration. His idea of nationalism is also regarded as incompatible with or opposing to collaborationist effort. However, his 1930s works show that he assimilated colonial discourse into his writing. It was his collaboration that enabled him to create such a counter-discourse that continued the advancement of the national ideals and movements that the Japanese government would have repressed. It should be noted that he did not align himself with all policies and ideologies the war-preparing colonial government promoted and enforced. He might have supported Japan's military expansionism but at the same time stood against other policies such as Japanization or assimilationism which denied Korean indigenous nationalist movements.

## **Conclusion**

Han Yongun's Buddhist writings, in particular those written in his later life, offer many alternatives to the existing mode of understanding him. Habitual assumptions informed by the nationalist perspective turn out to be erroneous and betray his ideas and claims. As I have shown, the gist of his nationalist ideas was not anti-Japanese resistance but self-reliance (self-criticism). Under the influence of Buddhism, he adopted this particular mode of nationalism and shared his national ideas with many cultural nationalists who often ended up collaborators. Thus he was not a superhero whose nationalism was unparalleled, original, and faultless. He did not encourage anti-Japanese sentiment but, on the contrary, forbade the Koreans to blame the colonial authorities. In this sense, he was rather pro-Japanese than anti-Japanese in sentiment. His basic intention was to produce a counter-discourse subverting the colonizer-colonized relationship, disenchanting the colonized mind, and above all, attaining spiritual independence from colonialism.

To Han, Buddhism was the primary and fundamental matter in everything. It was in no way a vehicle for politics, neither for colonialism nor for Korean nationalism, nor any other socio-political ideologies. He clearly articulated the notion that religious ideals and goals may not be identical or subordinate to those of political (nationalist) movements. Rather, he emphasized the precedence and transcendence of Buddhism. However, he did not mean that Buddhism was unworldly and unrealistic. What he tried to argue

was that in the relationship between Buddhism and politics, Buddhism should be the guideline for all human activities including political ideologies, not the other way around.

The idea that Han never compromised or collaborated with the colonial authorities needs to be seriously reconsidered. What is true is that he did not participate in war-effort campaigns. He refused taking a Japanese name and family registry. However, many of his later works, in particular written during wartime unfolded a different story, strongly related to his literary collaboration. He marshaled Buddhist themes and images in support of Japanese military aggression. He propagated a military spirit as the right attitude and behavior for people on the home front. Nowhere did he oppose Japan's warfare on moral, pacifistic grounds. Views that may be regarded as collaborationist are evident in his later writings. Resistance and collaboration co-existed in his life. With his writings, he further proved that the line separating them was hard to draw and the two worked in tandem rather than collided. His collaboration was a selective and at the same time subversive process through which he could impart a nationalist message to carry on national movements without yielding to the colonial government policy of suppressing Korean nationalism.

Han Yongun holds an important position in Korean history. His life is of considerable significance in contemporary Korean society where colonial history and its legacies are still relevant and sensitive issues. In tune with the popular acceptance of his role as a national hero, his birthplace has been restored and memorial museums, parks and monuments have been constructed in his memory. Every year, a cultural festival is held and awards named after him are given to writers, scholars and a host of eminent leaders in the world. These social practices serve as a reminder how important it is to more accurately illuminate his diverse and alternative considerations of Buddhism, nationalism, and collaboration with colonialism. This study may help people to recognize the complexities and ambiguities of the colonial era in Korea and enable them to settle or resolve the troubled colonial legacy.