Chapter 3

Religion reclaimed: Yi Kwangsu's Buddhism in its relationship to literature, nationalism and collaboration

Introduction

Many remember Yi Kwangsu (李光洙, 1892-1950) as the iconic figure in modern Korean literary history who wrote the first modern novel *Mujŏng* 無情 (Heartless, 1917), but he was not a mere writer. Yi was the greatest intellectual of the day and the highest leader of Suyang Tong'uhoe (moral cultivation society), an organization which played a pivotal role in nationalist movements in colonial Korea.[1] Yi's significance in colonial society is however not confined to nationalism and nationalist movements but extends to pro-Japanese collaboration, which is one of the most controversial issues in today's Korea, as manifested in a surge of attempts to settle the colonial past and legacies.

Yet despite widespread publicity and growing controversy over Yi Kwangsu, there is an important fact that has gone largely unnoticed and unstudied. It is that Yi was a very religious person during his entire life and that the diverse elements of his life – literature, nationalism and collaboration – were primarily associated with his religious views and beliefs. He was not a follower of one single religion. He was influenced by a variety of religions, from the indigenous religion of Tonghak (Eastern Learning), to Puritanism, Tolstoy's Christian beliefs and in his final years, the Buddhist faith. Among these, Buddhism is particularly noteworthy because it served as a great inspiration for creating literary works in his later days. In view of the large amounts of Buddhist-inspired works and the high level of creativity, completion, and popularity, no one can doubt that he was an important Buddhist writer.

Buddhism was Yi's faith during the most critical time of his personal and public life. He was personally engaged in life-or-death struggles with terrible diseases and trapped in despair due to his son's death. Publicly, he was caught in the middle of the Suyang Tong'uhoe Incident and afterwards, he proclaimed himself pro-Japanese collaborator and feverishly cried for Japanization (*kōminka*, 皇民化) and oneness of Japan and Korea (*naisen ittai*). Why was he so eager to incorporate Buddhism into his literary works while posing as pro-Japanese? Was his Buddhist literary work aimed to propagate Buddhist teachings regardless of the situation?[2] Was it a source of comfort in all

[1] Cho Paewŏn 조배원, "Yi Kwangsu: han kŭndaehwaronja-ŭi ilgŭrŏjin ch'osang" 한 근대화론자의 일그러진 초상 in *Han'guk yŏksa yŏn'guhoe wepchin* 8 한국역사연구회 웹진 8 (August 2002).

[2] Ch'oe Chŏngsŏk 崔正錫, "Ch'unwŏn Yi Kwangsu-ŭi taesŭng Pulgyo sasang yŏn'gu" 春園 李光洙의 大乘佛教思想 研究 (Ph.D. dissertation, Tongguk Univeristy, 1977); Yi Hwahyŏng 李和珩,

his troubles, a way he tried to forget worldly affairs? Did his preoccupation with Buddhism show his repentance for his pro-Japanese collaboration? Or was his Buddhism nothing but a vehicle of war propaganda, justifying wartime ideologies such as support behind the lines for the imperial army (*ch'onghu ponggong*, 銃後奉公) as Yi Kyŏnghun points out?[3]

Looking for answers to these questions, this chapter will discuss two of Yi's historical novels, *Tanjong aesa* 端宗哀史 (A tragic story of Tanjong, 1928-1929) and *Sejo taewang* 世祖大王 (Great King Sejo, 1940) which were written when he went through the most turbulent time in his personal and public life and came to be preoccupied with Buddhism. The most answers will be found in the second novel but to understand this abstruse novel written as a follow-up to *Tanjong aesa*, it is necessary to examine the first novel in advance, questioning how fifteenth-century Chosŏn history was captured and reconstructed differently in those novels, written ten years apart, and how Yi's telling and retelling of the historical past show his take on colonial reality.[4] I will pay special attention to religions, in particular Buddhism, which are placed by Yi at the center of his fiction. My examination of Yi's religious beliefs will bring to light how his idea of nationalism was promoted, revised, criticized and restored and how Buddhism, in particular, played a crucial role in solving problems such as pro-Japanese collaboration and coping with dilemmas in his life.

Tanjong aesa: tragic history, colonization and the nationalist movement

Yi's novel *Tanjong aesa* was serialized in *Tong'a ilbo* 東亞日報, for one year. The novel chronicles King Tanjong's life from birth to death. However, the main character of the novel seems to be Prince Suyang 首陽大君 (later King Sejo) rather than Tanjong. The main event in the novel is the process of Prince Suyang's usurpation of the throne. This bloody historical *coup d'état* began with slaying the then minister Kim Chongsŏ 金宗瑞 who was Suyang's most formidable political rival and continued to remove Suyang's opponents, and even his own brothers. By dethroning his young nephew, King Tanjong 端宗, Suyang finally ascended the throne himself as King Sejo 世祖 in 1455. These events are not dealt with seriously in official records or in historical studies.[5]

"Ch'unwŏn sosŏr-e nat'annan Pulgyo sasang" 春園小說에 나타난 佛敎思想 in *Yi Kwangsu yŏn'gu: ha* 李光洙 硏究 : 下, edited by Tongguk taehakkyo pusŏl Hanguk munhak yŏn'guso (Seoul: T'aehaksa, 1984), pp.119-136; Ch'oe Wŏngyu 崔元圭, "Ch'unwŏnsi-ŭi Pulygogwan" 春園詩의 佛敎觀 in Ibid., pp.503-513.

[3] Yi Kyŏnghun 이경훈, *Yi Kwangsu-ŭi ch'inil munhak yŏn'gu* 이광수의 친일문학연구 (Seoul: T'aehaksa, 1998), pp.91-152.

[4] For a more detailed discussion, see Jung-shim Lee, "History as colonial storytelling: Yi Kwangsu's historical novels on fifteenth-century Chosŏn history" in *Korean Histories* 1.1 (2009):81-105, pp.81-87.

[5] Historical studies mainly focus on politics during Sejo's reign or on Sejo's reorganization of the administrative system and establishment of new governmental institutions. Some studies have dealt with the Tanjong restoration movement, but despite its popularity, few seem to delve deep into Sejo's usurpation of the throne.

However, recollections of that time have been eagerly reproduced in unconventional, historical, narratives such as *yasa* 野史 (collections of interesting anecdotes, essays, memoirs, and fragments) and *pang'oein munhak* 方外人文學 (outsiders' literature). As an example of a *yasa* in the Chosŏn period, *Taedong yasŭng* 大東野乘 informs us how many Confucian scholars were traumatized by Sejo's usurpation of the throne.[6] They had heated debates as to whether the seizure of kingship by force could be morally justified and politically legitimated according to Confucian principles.[7]

After five hundred years, Yi Kwangsu reworked the historical incident in his novel *Tanjong aesa*. The novel begins with the birth of Tanjong. Hearing the news, the then king Sejong 世宗 (Tanjong's grandfather) entrusts two officials, Sŏng Sammun 成三問 and Sin Sukchu 申叔舟, with the care of his grandson after his death. Tanjong grows up. Prince Suyang (Tanjong's uncle), along with Kwŏn Nam 權擥, is already beginning to gather people to conspire, devising a secret and elaborate plan for the future. The following long chapter gives a detailed description of Suyang's *coup d'état*. Suyang's right-hand man, Han Myŏnghoe 韓明澮, draws up a hit list of their enemies. Suyang's warriors kill every single opponent on the list and their families, accusing them of treason. Suyang is depicted as utterly ruthless. He kills anybody who expresses the slightest dissent towards him. The cruelty reaches a peak in a detailed description of a killing in which his warriors even murder two- and three year-old toddlers.[8] In the third chapter Suyang dethrones Tanjong and ascends to the throne himself. First, through the successful coup, he becomes the main holder of power, occupying more than one position including that of prime minister, and then he forces Tanjong to abdicate the throne in favor of himself.

Subsequently, the novel recalls another historical event known as the Sayuksin Incident 死六臣事件 (1456). This was representative of the resistance against Sejo. Officials who supported the deposed King Tanjong plotted to assassinate Sejo and his officials, taking the opportunity of the visit of a group of Ming envoys to carry out the assassinations. However, their plan failed due to internal betrayal, and the six plotters were tortured to death. Yi Kwangsu depicts this incident in full detail but from Sejo's point of view. Sejo's meritorious retainers feel uneasy and intimidated by the presence under the same sky of the deposed king, Tanjong. Although Tanjong is dethroned and has lost his political power, public sentiment is still with him. The Ming Chinese

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[6] This is a collection of anecdotes, essays, jokes and the like dating from the early Chosŏn period to c.1650.

[7] Yi Kang'ok 李康沃, "Chosŏn ch'o chunggi sadaebu mit p'yŏngmin ilhwa-ga Chosŏn hugi yadamgye sosŏllo palchŏnhanŭn han yangsang: Hong Yunsŏng irhwa-rŭl chungsim-ŭro 朝鮮 初,中期 士大夫 및 平民逸話가 朝鮮 後期 野譚系 小說로 發展하는 한 樣相: 洪允成逸話를 中心으로," in *Ko sosŏlsa-ŭi che munje* 古小說史의 諸問題, edited by Sŏng'o So Chaeyŏng kyosu hwallyŏk kinyŏm nonch'ong kanhaeng wiwŏnhoe 省吾 蘇在英敎授 還曆紀念論叢刊行委員會 (Seoul: Chimmundang, 1993), pp.851-853.

[8] *Yi Kwangsu chŏnjip* 4 李光洙全集 4 (Seoul: Samjungdang, 1971/1973), p.369.

emperor also does not fully recognize the legitimacy of Sejo's rule. Sejo's company awaits a chance to remove the deposed king. Sejo is the person who is most scared of rebellion or betrayal. The rebellious movement is however detected, and fails because of internal conflict. Most impressive is the scene in which the six ministers who plotted to restore Tanjong are captured by Sejo, are brutally tortured and meet death courageously rather than submit to Sejo. The novel ends with the murder of the ex-king in exile.

Yi Kwangsu offers a rich storyline and vividly depicts a series of incidents associated with Sejo's seizure of power in the fifteenth-century history. The majority of the characters and events in the novel are not fictional but correspond to real historical figures and incidents. In "Tanjong aesa-e taehayŏ" 端宗哀史에 對하여 (On *Tanjong aesa*, 1929), Yi Kwangsu himself stated:

> *The officially recorded documents on the young king are not so informative but non-official narratives (yasa, 野史) provide important insights into his character. Now I am using both official and non-official narratives as sources and I will try to refrain from fictionalizing them. I attempt in the novel to reconstruct the historical events and reproduce the historical figures as they were.*[9]

However, the novel is in no way an exact copy or representation of the succession of historical events. In his exhaustive study on Yi Kwangsu, Kim Tong'in 金東仁 (1900-1951) disclosed that Yi's novel was very much based upon a document written by Nam Hyoon entitled *Yuksinjŏn* 六臣傳 (Biographies of six scholars), and that Yi accepted Nam's view and errors uncritically.[10] Yi himself also admitted that, although he tried to write down impartially what the historical records stated, he could not look dispassionately at fifteen-century history but was as eager as if he was writing his own autobiography or drawing his own his own "portrait."[11] This remark informs us that the historical past recaptured in this novel is not the past itself but is related to the colonial present, and especially to Yi's personal life experiences in colonial Korea. Then, how should we read the novel?

The period in which Yi was writing and serializing this novel in the *Tong'a Ilbo* 東亞日報 was a critical moment in his life. He underwent a life-or-death struggle with chronic tuberculosis, and in January 1927, he had relapsed, coughing up blood several times and losing consciousness. In the middle of writing this novel, the disease attacked him again. In May 1929, he underwent a major operation, in which his left kidney was removed. The process of writing

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[9] In *Samch'ŏlli* 三千里 (June 1919). Republished in *Yi Kwangsu chŏnjip* 10, p.507.
[10] Kim Tong'in, *Ch'unwŏn yŏngu* 春園硏究 (Seoul: Ch'unjosa 春潮社, 1956), pp.108-126.
[11] Ha Ch'ŏljong 하철종, "Ch'unwŏn-gwa Tong'in yŏksa sosŏr-ŭi taebi-chŏk yŏn'gu: *Tanjong aesa*-wa *Tae Suyang*-ŭl chungsim-ŭro 춘원과 동인 역사소설의 대비적 연구: 단종애사와 대수양을 중심으로" (Ch'angwŏn: Ch'angwon University, 2005), p.44.

this serialized novel was interrupted eleven times.[12] His experiences of serious illness and the painful operations awakened Yi to the religious foundation of life and death. As he stated in his essay "Susultae wi-esŏ" 수술대 위에서 ("On the operating table," 1927), he realized that faced with death everything except religion disappeared.[13] In particular, the Buddhist view of impermanence (*musang*, 無常) appealed to him. He awoke to the illusory nature of suffering (*kogong*, 苦空) and the truth that nothing is permanent (*musang*, 無常), not even the self (*mua*, 無我). His awakening of impermanence was accompanied by a feeling of the sadness and a sense of transience of life. These feelings intensified whenever he prepared for his death and thought of his children, whom he would have to leave behind.

The Buddhist doctrine of impermanence is perceived in the secular world as referring to the fleetingness and sorrow of life as Yi did. However, this is far from the true meaning of impermanence. The Buddha's teaching that all things are impermanent was to let people realize the inherent nature of everything that exists in the universe in a state of change. It teaches them to seek the true nature of self instead of attaching oneself to the illusory and transient things. However, as a person who just began to feel an affinity with Buddhism, Yi had limited ability to perceive the deeper meaning of impermanence and relied on the secularized meaning.

Tragedy typically evokes memories of the rise and fall of individuals and countries. There were many tragic incidents in Korean history but Yi Kwangsu saw the Tanjong story in particular as a dramatic reflection of the vanity of life. It is no coincidence that the beginning of the novel corresponds to Yi's religious insights and moods as mentioned above. In the novel, Tanjong's grandfather King Sejong worries about the poor health of his son Munjong 文宗. The sick Munjong is heartbroken, thinking of his all too short life and seeing his little son (Tanjong), a simple and innocent child, happily playing games. It is obvious that what King Sejong and King Munjong feel mirrors the writer's suffering when looking at his own children. The novel proceeds to depict the transience of life, in a scene in which King Tanjong is degraded to the much lower noble rank of Prince Nosan'gun and sent into exile by his uncle Suyang. To emphasize this focus on transience, Yi has court ladies lament the uncertainty of life upon seeing Tanjong's dethronement and the death of various people in the course of Suyang's usurpation. Their only solace is reciting the Buddha's name, chanting mantras wishing that Tanjong be reborn in paradise in the next life, or venting their animosity (towards Suyang). They also pray for the dethroned king's good fortune, believing that it is all they can do. Such a description of the transience of life is based upon Yi's understanding of the Buddhist notion of impermanence.

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[12] Song Paekhŏn 송백헌, "Han'guk kŭndae yŏksa sosŏl yŏn'gu 韓國 近代 歷史小說硏究" (Ph.D. dissertation, Tanguk University, 1982), p.71.

[13] In *Munye kongnon* 文藝公論 (July 1929). Republished in *Yi Kwangsu chŏnjip* 8, pp.333-334.

Still, sadness, loneliness and the transience of life are not the writer's main concern. Yi's primary focus is the similarity between fifteenth-century history and contemporary colonial reality, which he encapsulates in his novel as follows:

> *The merits and deficiencies of our ancestors living 500 years ago reappear among us today so clearly and in such a similar manner. Even the event which took place in the past seems to repeat itself in the present day. This might be the reason why historical reading is so exciting*.[14]

What is the historical similarity Yi found? What incident is he talking about? What Yi Kwangsu contemplated while looking back to Sejo's usurpation of the throne in the fifteenth century is not the historical event per se, but what happened in the early twentieth century. In other words, *Tanjong aesa* is a narrative, in the guise of fiction and history, representing the colonial experience of the Koreans. In a review, Pak Chonghwa 朴鐘和 succinctly sums up the similarities between the historical past and colonial present. The people who were subjected to the coercive prince Suyang four hundred years ago seem to stand for the contemporary Koreans who were by force deprived of their country by the Japanese. The dethronement and death of the young king Tanjong is reminiscent of what the deposed Korean emperor Kojong 高宗 and his young son Sunjong 純宗 underwent in the present. Sejo evokes Meiji or Taishō Japan. The martyred and loyal ministers in the fifteenth century are reminiscent of the loyal ministers of the Taehan Empire, whereas Sejo's meritorious officers such as Sin Sukchu and Han Myŏnghoe are reminiscent of Yi Wanyong and Song Pyŏngjun who gave in to Japanese demands. Contemporary readers felt a great deal of sympathy and empathy for the young king, as his tragedy was reminiscent of their colonized condition. Tanjong's sorrow, mortification and tears represented their own lives under colonial rule, which is why this novel garnered enormous popularity among contemporary readers.[15]

Yi's historical novel reflected the sentiment and feelings shared by most of the Koreans who deprived of their sovereignty by Japan were living under colonial rule, "having their voices muffled during the day and wetting their pillows at night."[16] Pak Chonghwa focuses on matching historical personages with his contemporaries and concludes that Yi intended to depict the battle between good and evil and to promote the moral righteousness of the Korean nation and to condemn the injustice and misdeeds perpetuated by Japan and bad Koreans.[17] In my estimation, however, this novel does not merely end with

[14] *Yi Kwangsu chŏnjip* 4, p.404.
[15] Pak Chonghwa 朴鐘和, "Tanjong aesa" 端宗哀史 in *Yi Kwangsu chŏnjip* 4, pp.610-611.
[16] Ibid., p.610.
[17] Ibid.

stirring people's emotion. Yi did not simply attempt to identify good or evil in colonial Korea and to morally judge people in a dichotomous manner. He seems to have focused more on historical events such as Sejo's usurpation and the Sayuksin Incident than on personages. It means that we need to look for what were the equivalents of those historical events in his present day.

The bottom line here is that Yi wanted to tackle Japan's colonization of Korea in this novel, taking Suyang's *coup d'état* as an allegory. Instead of simply condemning the colonial event, he provided a detailed picture how Korea was colonized by Japan by means of militarism, international law and new forms of domination such as the protectorate. Yi depicts Suyang as a military man. The protagonist Suyang prefers archery and horse riding to reading Confucian classics, and cannot compose a line of Chinese verse. In Suyang's view, ancient Chinese history is musty and tiresome, consisting of mere words. Due to an inferiority complex, he harbors antipathy towards Confucian scholars, classics, and rituals.[18] This depiction of Suyang does not exactly correspond to the historical Prince Suyang who was good at martial arts but also highly literate and scholarly. It is rather redolent of Meiji Japan which abandoned its Confucian tradition and culture under the motto of leaving Asia and resorted to militarism to seek colonies as its Western predecessors had done.

Suyang's c*oup d'état* was bloody and violent. So many lives were sacrificed for his political goal. Suyang was not reluctant even to kill his brothers. As mentioned before, Yi also denounced the cruelty of the historical event in his novel, but on top of that, he expressed in detail and in full how Suyang's usurpation was a sophisticated and goal-oriented process. To usurp the throne, Suyang resorts to the sudden, violent overthrow of the existing king. It is not simply a matter of murdering the king. His military coup is not a rash accidental happening without any goals and plans. With the help of crafty advisors, he initiates a deliberate meticulous long term planning process, gathering and training a group of fighters, who will act as the vanguard in the coup. The ultimate purpose of this coup is the dethronement of Tanjong, but for that Suyang first needs to remove all his political enemies, particularly remove two key figures, Kim Chongsŏ 金宗瑞 and Hwang Poin 皇甫仁. The coup is successful and as a result, Prince Suyang becomes the main power holder. Nonetheless, he does not directly become a king. He first gains all the important positions, including those of prime minister, minister of personnel and minister of defense, but still allows Tanjong remain the king. Suyang does not directly wrest the throne from Tanjong, either. Through his machinations, Tanjong abdicates the throne in favor of himself. Suyang ascends to the throne at Tanjong's earnest request.

Yi's particular depiction of Suyang's c*oup d'état* parallels the annexation of Korea by Japan. Compared with the long history of colonization in Europe,

[18] *Yi Kwangsu chŏnjip* 4, pp.272, 290, and 291.

the colonial expansion of Meiji Japan was "phenomenally rapid,"[19] like c*oup d'état* one might say. The political actions taken by Meiji Japan in order to annex Korea were first and foremost militaristic. Militarism was quite acceptable at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. Together with international law, it was the way Western imperial powers acquired colonial territories. Within this context, Meiji Japan strove to enhance its militarism, to build a strong nation and to colonize its neighbors, which was seen as a prerequisite for overcoming its own unequal and weak position vis-à-vis Western imperial powers and ensuring its national security. Japan demonstrated its military power through two wars: the Sino-Japanese War (1894-95) and the Russo-Japanese War (1905). The removal of China and Russia was aimed at taking two key powers out of the equation and acquiring new colonies such as Taiwan and Korea.

The way in which Yi explains Suyang's military *coup d'état* as primarily targeting Kim Chongsŏ and Hwang Poin corresponds to the two wars against China and Russia. Yi reconstructed the historical incident of the slaying of Kim Chongsŏ in a way to fit in to Japan's fighting two wars against China and Russia. As a result of winning the wars, Japan was able to wield more power over the politics of Korea. However, Meiji Japan did not directly take over the sovereignty of Korea, as Suyang does in the novel. In 1905, right after the victory of the war against Russia, Japan took over Korea's diplomacy and made Korea its protectorate; in 1907, it dismissed the Korean army and took full control of Korea's domestic affairs. It brought the Korean government, although nominally headed by King Sunjong, under the leadership of the Resident-General. Thus, step by step, Japan finally annexed Korea in 1910 and the Taehan Empire (Korea) relinquished sovereignty to it, exactly King Tanjong had abdicated in favor of Suyang.

Yi's comparison of the annexation of Korea with a sudden coup first suggests that the colonial event was accidental rather than planned, but at the same time he revealed Japan's persistent imperialist ambitions (Suyang's desire to be a king) and its primary goal of acquiring colonies (Suyang's enthronement). While allegorically depicting the exact sequence of events, he suggested that Japan drew up elaborate plots and steadily prepared for the annexation of Korea. In the same vein, he explored how Japan not only resorted to arms but attempted to officially legalize and legitimize its colonial expansion via a form of treaty that was legal under international law, as Western imperialism had done with its colonies. For example, whenever Suyang removes his political enemies, he makes up good reasons for doing so, such as protecting and safeguarding Tanjong from dangerous and ambitious officials who could pose a threat to his authority. Suyang and his party find it

[19] Bonnie B. Oh, "Meiji Imperialism: "Phenomenally Rapid"" in *Japan Examined: Perspectives on Modern Japanese History*, Edited by Harry Wray and Hilary Conroy (University of Hawai'i Press, 1983), pp.122-130.

opportune to write a decree in the name of King Tanjong in which those officials are proclaimed to be traitors and Suyang is represented as a patriotic subject who safeguards Tanjong's throne. However, as Yi explains, what was proclaimed was not true. The officials Suyang killed were not dangerous and traitorous but instead loyal subjects whom King Sejong and Tanjong trusted. Many of them were innocent, as Suyang's party also admits in the novel. What Suyang states through the royal decree is rhetoric to falsely accuse his political rivals and opponents of committing rebellion and to justify his military coup and hide his own desire for the throne.

Suyang's sophisticated rhetoric of "protection and safety" and his documentation are eerily reminiscent of a series of treaties (signed in 1876, 1904, 1905, and 1907) between Korea and Japan in the early twentieth century. Whenever Japan conducted wars, it signed treaties with Korea in advance. In those treaties, Japan's political rivals, China and Russia, were imaged as threatening powers, seeking sovereignty over Korea. On the contrary, Japan was described as a country fighting on behalf of Korea and protecting it. The treaties repeatedly recognized Korea as an independent state having equal rights as Japan and ensured Korean independence and peace in Asia. Korea and Korean independence were indeed perceived as important by Japan, not for the sake of Korea but for Japan's own national security. Japan needed to prevent Korea from being colonized by other powers such as China, Russia, and any third power and keep Korea independent, regarding Korea as the front line or buffer zone for Japan.[20] To the Korean intellectuals and leaders, however, Japan claimed to be a safeguard of Korea's autonomy and the peacekeeper of Asia. However, as Yi implies in the novel, the promises Japan made in the treaties were an empty rhetoric to hide its own imperialist desire and to justify its military actions and could easily be broken when Japan won more power through military victories.

Of course, Yi could not capture all aspects of the colonization of Korea in his novel. He mainly focused on the political incidents and aspects and completely neglected socio-economic issues. However, this novel shows his particular perception that colonialism was not merely a matter of political gains but also a psychological matter. Ashis Nandy argues that "the first differentia of colonialism is a state of mind in the colonizers and the colonized".[21] For that, colonialism craftily used notions of sex, gender, and age to dominate its colonies and produced a cultural consensus on colonial domination, while symbolizing it as the dominance of men and masculinity over women and

[20] Mark R. Peattie, "Japanese Attitudes Toward Colonialism, 1895-1945" in *The Japanese Colonial Empire, 1895-1945* edited by Ramon H. Myers and Mark R. Peattie (Princeton University Press, 1984), pp.82-96; Koen de Ceuster, "From Modernization to Collaboration, the Dilemma of Korean Cultural Nationalism: the Case of Yun Ch'i-ho (1865-1945)" (Leuven PhD dissertation, 1994), pp.473-475 and 529.

[21] Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism* (Oxford University Press, 1983/2009), p.1.

children. Yi's fictionalization of the historical past uncovers this psychology of colonialism. In the novel, colonial Korea is portrayed as a young, weak and innocent child (King Tanjong) and the Japanese colonizer as a strong, ambitious and greedy male adult (Prince Suyang). As evident in the letter requesting China's sanction for his investiture, Suyang insists that King Tanjong is unqualified to be a king because his body is as weak as that of a woman and has been ill from childhood and no ability to rule the country. Tanjong's mental infantility, physical weakness and political incompetence are argued by Suyang as having caused the intervention of wicked officials such as Kim Chongsŏ. Suyang's party manipulates Tanjong to acknowledge Suyang's moral superiority, intellectual prominence and political maturity and to hand over his sovereignty to Suyang as a matter of course.[22] In this way, Yi reveals the paradigm of the child-adult relationship Meiji Japan adopted to manipulate the Koreans into feeling inferior by nature and unqualified to manage their own country, and to justify its political subjugation of Korea as a well-qualified ruler possessing military strength, knowledge (Western technology and modernity), racial and cultural superiority, and political maturity.

This novel also shows Yi's attempts to disclose the falsehood of such a colonial ideology and to subvert the myths of the innate inferiority of the Koreans and the superiority of the Japanese colonizer. Tanjong who symbolizes Korea is depicted as passive, effeminate, and helpless by trembling in fear and shock. However, Yi shows that such a disposition is in no way inherent. He emphasizes that Tanjong is highly intelligent from childhood and by nature has a cheerful, lovely, gentle personality but has been depressed since he experienced a string of tragic events.[23] Borrowing the opinion of the third party, Ming China, the writer informs the readers that Tanjong's physical weakness and incompetence are not real but forged by Sejo to justify his usurpation of the throne. The truth is that Tanjong is in no way in poor health. No illness is found in his little body. Since Tanjong has married, he is even healthier. The Chinese court judges that Tanjong is lucid enough to be a king and competent to manage state affairs. From his childhood, people have expected him to be a wise ruler. Suyang's accusation of Kim Chongsŏ and Hwang Poin as national traitors is also exposed as false, since their loyalty is well-known among Chinese envoys.[24] Yi shows the groundlessness of Suyang's claim of Tanjong's inferiority and by doing so, he also reveals the falsehood of the claim that the Koreans are racially inferior to the Japanese in many aspects.

The colonial vision of inferior Korea and superior Japan is subverted in his novel even further. Using history as a form of allegory, Yi shows that it was not Korea but Japan which had been afflicted by a sense of inferiority. Suyang who embodies Japan is depicted as a military man. He is good at archery and

[22] *Yi Kwangsu chŏnjip* 4, p.445.
[23] Ibid., pp.291 and 411-412.
[24] Ibid., p.445.

horse riding but he is ignorant of Confucian knowledge and philosophy. He cannot compose a line of Chinese verse. If King Munjong (Tanjong's father), Prince Anp'yŏng, and other scholars discuss state affairs in Confucian terms or hold a scholarly debate, he does not understand what it is about and often excluded. His younger brother Prince Anp'yŏng, in particular, is respected among literati on account of his eloquent poetry writing and literary pursuits, whereas few acknowledge the presence of Suyang. Once, his younger brother belittles him, by saying "You do not know what we are talking about. Why don't' you go outside and hunt some rabbits?"[25] Confucianism makes Suyang feel inferior. Due to his inferiority complex, he harbors an antipathy towards Confucian scholars, classics, and rituals. This Suyang is far from the historical Suyang, who was intelligent and scholarly, but closer to Japan which had a cultural inferiority complex vis-à-vis China in pre-modern times and the West in recent days.[26] Confucianism serves as a reminder of Japan's former self, which was viewed by Confucian Koreans as less advanced within the Sinitic cultural sphere.[27]

Yi's careful observations of the colonization of Korea and the ideology that underpinned Japanese colonialism result in a reconsideration of his early cultural nationalist view of the fundamental reason why the Koreans lost their country and were colonized. In his earlier magnum opus "Minjok kaejoron" 民族改造論 (*A treatise on national reconstruction*, 1922), he found the reason in the moral character of the Korean people. At that time, his focus was not on Japan. Korean maladministration was given as the background for colonization but not as the fundamental reason. He saw that the decay of Chosŏn Korea was not caused by one or two persons. Time and again he stressed that the whole Korean people (*Chosŏn minjok*) was to blame and the moral flaws in the national character were the fundamental reason for national deterioration. [28] He saw the Koreans as deficient without consciousness of freedom, equality, and progress. Koreans collectively were characterized by deceptiveness, selfishness, and lack of public virtue and of unity. Yet, he saw that it was possible to cultivate their morality and minds and to reconstruct a nation on the basis of an improved national identity. Refraining from criticizing the Japanese, he focused on depicting the details of the moral shortcomings of the Koreans and called for the practice of self-construction as a gradual but fundamental way to overcome difficulties.

In *Tanjong aesa* written by 1930, Yi still explains the importance of the idea of morality in his self-cultivation movement. But this time, the object he criticizes as morally deficient is not Korea but Japan. He has found that the

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[25] Ibid., pp.290-291.
[26] Peter Duus, *The Abacus and the Sword: The Japanese Penetration of Korea, 1895-1910* (University of California Press, 1995), pp.1-25.
[27] Kyeong-Hee Choi, "Impaired Body as Colonial Trope: Kang Kyŏng'ae's "Underground Village" in *Public Culture* (13:3) (Fall, 2001): 431-458, p.434.
[28] Republished in *Yi Kwangsu chŏnjip* 10, pp.125-127.

Japanese colonizers are not morally superior, but in reality inferior and that their moral flaws caused the entire tragedy of the colonial present. Yi's critical view of Suyang's personal flaws alludes to this:

> *He [Suyang] was smart enough to know everything. But all his virtue and all his brightness were subjected to an irrepressible desire […]. His uncontrollable ambition determined his fate as the protagonist of the tragedy. This shortcoming in his personality was stronger than his intellect.*[29]

Suyang, the avatar of Japan, is not depicted as morally upright, nor as absolutely evil. He is a wise, virtuous, brave, talented and competent prince. However, all his positive qualities are eventually undone by a fatal flaw in his personality. Suyang has an uncontrollable desire and ambition in his mind to be a king. For that, he does not mind ruthlessly killing everybody who turns against him. After brutally eliminating all enemies on his way to the throne, he is paranoid about possible rebellions and forcibly subdues any rebels. He is devoid of humanity and a sense of morality. To frighten Tanjong and subjugate him, Suyang appears with the heads of the officials he has killed and shows them to the king. He even brandishes his sword and kills eunuchs in front of Tanjong.[30] Like him, his warriors wield immense power, cruelly killing women and babies for fun. Many lives are sacrificed due to his irrepressible desire for the throne.

With the depiction of Suyang's selfish greed (*yoksim*), desire for the throne, and brutality out of self-interest, Yi vividly dramatizes Meiji Japan's uncontrollable craving for power, its military aggression leading to the annexation of Korea when in the first ten years of military rule (*budan seiji*) only military officers were appointed as governors-general of colonial Korea who suppressed any disobedience with guns and swords. The Japanese colonial power pointed to the maladministration of the Korean Confucian state as the main cause for the weakness and ruin of Chosŏn Korea.[31] It blamed others, the Koreans and their former state, for their own moral shortcomings, to hide its political desire and its aggressive politics motivated by its self-interest and paranoia. Yi questioned the legitimacy of such a colonial power. He exposed the problematic nature of its political desires, ideologies and actions and brought to light that the moral deficiency the Japanese tried to hide was the fundamental cause of the colonization of Korea.

In the same way, Yi's view of the Korean also completely changed in this novel compared with that expressed in "Minjok kaejoron." As he himself pointed out in "*Mujŏng* tŭng chŏn chakp'um-ŭl ŏhada" 無情 等 全作品을 語하다 (Discussing all works including *Mujŏng*,1939), through many of his

[29] *Yi Kwangsu chŏnjip* 4, p.407.
[30] *Yi Kwangsu chŏnjip* 4, pp.348-350.
[31] *Yi Kwangsu chŏnjip* 10, p.125.

novels he had depicted the shortcomings of the Korean nation, for example, in the guise of historical personalities. However, in this novel *Tanjong aesa*, he himself said that he intended to take the opposite approach and underline "the gallant character of the Korean nation."[32] The Confucian notions which are used to evoke Japan's sense of inferiority are also used to highlight the Koreans' moral strength. In the novel, the six martyred ministers' devotion to righteousness (*ŭi*, 義), regardless of personal benefit and self-interest, represents the moral and spiritual strength of the Korean people. The Sayuksin Incident depicted at the end the novel is to demonstrate such spirituality, and more concretely may be seen as an allegory of the March First Movement (1919) as I will argue below.

> *The flesh and blood of righteous people make this land righteous. Even the grass that grows on the tombs of the righteous fertilizes this land. Without such righteous people, this land will be ruined. Fearlessness in the service of loyalty is the foremost enemy of Suyang.*[33]

The writer focuses on the confrontation between the usurper Suyang's selfish greed and the six martyred ministers' selfless loyalty to King Tanjong. Despite Sejo (Suyang)'s reign[34] of terror, there are a small number of ministers who refuse all the bait Suyang throws at them and risk their lives for the sake of King Tanjong. These ministers stick to their Confucian loyalty in serving their previous sovereign Tanjong. Their strong spirit cannot be changed by Suyang's threats and oppression. Their unyielding spirit is the strongest weapon against Suyang and defies his uncontrollable desires. Like Suyang's elaborate plan of usurpation, they also plot to expel Suyang from the throne and to restore the deposed King Tanjong. However, their attempt fails due to betrayal but according to the writer, in their fearless and selfless service to Tanjong they do not die in vain. Their spirit of righteousness and loyalty live on and continue to protect the land the quotation above suggests. Yi Kwangsu depicts this incident in full detail, showing that the six plotters who are tortured to death are not afraid of dying. They do not yield to Sejo but insist that nothing is wrong with their rebellion. They meet a terrible end but their deaths epitomize the utmost bravery and spiritual strength.

With regard to the Confucian vocabulary Yi uses in his description of the clash between Suyang and the six ministers, some scholars think that this was a retreat from his early progressive views, which were critical of Confucianism.[35] Others conclude that this is intended to boost "national

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[32] *Samch'ŏlli* (Jan. 1939). Republished in *Yi Kwangsu chŏnjip* 10, pp.522-523.

[33] *Yi Kwangsu chŏnjip* 4, p.407.

[34] Sejo is a *myoho* (廟號, temple names) given posthumously. In Chosŏn Korea, after kings died, their ancestral tablets were kept in a royal temple (shrine) which recorded the temple name of the deceased rulers. That became the way to refer to them and to praise their achievements.

[35] Kim Yunsik 김윤식, *Yi Kwangsu-wa kŭ-ŭi shidae* 이광수와 그의 시대 2 (Seoul: Sol, 1999/2001), p.171.

consciousness" (*minjok ŭisik*, 民族意識), and accordingly categorize this novel as a "nationalistic" novel.[36] However, as I discussed in the previous chapter, Confucianism which is incorporated into colonial-period literature should not be taken at face value, because it is often refashioned into an allegory conveying nationalist discourses. The usual conclusion that Yi fostered national spirit using the Confucian virtue should be specified, because nationalist ideas are diverse and complex, even changing. As long as Yi's novel is concerned, we should also ask what the historical incident directly alludes to in relation to colonial reality.

In my view, Yi's emphasis on the Sayuksin Incident and the Confucian virtues the martyred ministers embody can be viewed as a reference to the March First Movement and its spirit. The failed attempt in the 15th –century to restore the deposed Tanjong to the throne bears resemblance to this national demonstration in the 20th –century of which one aim was to restore the collapsed state of Chosŏn Korea. In fact, some intellectuals devised to place the deposed Emperor Kojong 高宗 as a focal point to unite people and to rebuild the country. They even purchased a refugee house for the king somewhere in China.[37] But Kojong met a sudden and mysterious death, as did Tanjong 500 years before him. The death of Kojong stirred up sorrow and patriotic feelings among Koreans because it symbolically meant to them the final extinction of Korean autonomy. His funeral served as the impetus for the March First movement.[38] Both movements failed miserably. In the fifteenth century six martyrs were brutally executed, but they were not the only victims of the Sayuksin Incident. As Yi depicts in his novel, scores of people were put to death, and hundreds of their family members and relatives were given to other officials as slaves and concubines.[39] This depiction evokes the atrocity the March First Movement was faced with in the twentieth century. The movement which was initiated as a series of peaceful demonstrations was violently suppressed by the Japanese highhanded police. Not only the thirty-three national representatives but a number of participants were arrested, severely tortured and killed.

Looking back in history at the Tanjong Restoration Movement, Yi recalls the recent incident of the March First Movement. Yi offers his

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[36] Song Paekhŏn 宋百憲, "Han'guk kŭndae yŏksa sosŏl yŏn'gu" 韓國近代歷史小說硏究 (Tanguk taehakkyo PhD dissertation, 1982), pp.71-87; Kong Imsun 공임순, "Han'guk kŭndae yŏksa sosŏr-ŭi changnŭron-chŏk yŏn'gu" 한국 근대 역사소설의 장르론적 연구 (Sŏgan taehakkyo, PhD dissertation, 2000), pp. 60-68.

[37] *Han'guksa* 한국사 47 (Kwach'ŏn: Kuksa p'yŏnch'an wiwŏnhoe 국사편찬위원회, 2001), pp.307-308.

[38] Koen de Ceuster, "From Modernization to Collaboration, the Dilemma of Korean Cultural Nationalism: the Case of YunCh'i-ho (1865-1945)", pp.305-309.

[39] For more detail about the punishment of those rebels, see Yang Chiha 양지하, "Sejo i-nyŏn (1456) Tanjong pogwi sakkŏn-ŭi sŏngkyŏk 세조 2년 (1456) 단종복위사건의 성격" (Seoul: Ewha Womans University, 2008), pp.45-51; Yu Yŏngbak 柳永博, "Tanjong pogwi moŭijadŭr-ŭi sabŏp ch'ŏri: Tanjong pogwi moŭi-e kwanhan yŏn'gu 2 端宗復位 謀議者들의 司法處理: 端宗復位 謀議에 관한 硏究 2" in *Chindan hakpo* 震檀學報 78 (1994): pp.125-145.

perspective of the event that took place a decade ago by presenting his view of the Sayuksin Incident. While providing a full description of the historical incident, Yi reminds the readers of what they experienced during the March First Movement. He does not focus on the failure of the historical incident but on the righteous and loyal officials who were adamantly resisted Suyang's blandishments and threats and did not mind risking their lives in service to Tanjong. Instead of the result, he extols the spirit of the six martyred ministers. In Yi's view, the righteous and loyal officials demonstrated the moral and spiritual strength of the Korean people in history. The March First Movement may be seen as demonstrating the same Korean spiritual bravery and strength, even though it did not achieve its goal. Against the Japanese colonial authorities who wielded brutal force in his view, it exposed their moral inferiority. Yi's commemoration of the death of the six martyred ministers is thus intended to commemorate the sacrifice of so many of the participants in the March First Movement. It is probably no accident that 1929, the year in which this novel was written, was the tenth anniversary of the March First Movement. The novel was a reminder for the Koreans not to forget the national event of a decade earlier and to consider its national historic significance. In sum, drawing a parallel between history and colonial reality and emphasizing Confucian tradition and virtues, Yi's novel *Tanjong aesa* mirrors the colonial experience and the March First Movement, in an attempt to subvert the colonial ideology that saturated the era.

Sejo taewang: Buddhism and the Suyang Tong'uhoe Incident

Ten years after writing *Tanjong aesa*, Yi Kwangsu published a follow-up novel: *Sejo taewang* 世祖大王. This novel has the same historical person Prince Suyang (now King Sejo) as its main character but it is not to retrace Suyang's seizure of power once again. Yi deals with Sejo's reign, a decade later. He does not cover the whole thirteen years of Sejo's reign. The focus is not on the king's reorganization of the administrative system or on his effective frontier defense, topics historians usually concentrate on. Yi only focalizes the last years before Sejo's death. The big difference between the two novels is their religious background. The first novel highlights Confucianism whereas the second novel features Buddhism.

In fact, in order to write this novel, Yi read a vast number of Buddhist scriptures, amounting to four or five thousand pages. The novel contains many direct quotations from a wide range of sutras such as the *Complete Enlightenment Sutra* (Wŏngakkyŏng, 圓覺經), the *Diamond Sutra* (Kumganggyŏng, 金剛經), the *Suramgama-Dharani-Sutra* (Nŭngŏmgyŏng, 楞嚴經) and the *Lotus Sutra* (Pŏphwagyŏng, 法華經). Yi copied a number of phrases and passages from those sutras and included them verbatim in his own text in Sino-Korean. These quotations, however, make the novel deviate from the genre of fiction and come closer to being a collection of sermons. No specific incidents occur; the plot of

the novel is that Sejo holds Buddhist ceremonies and rituals one after the other. A sequence of sermons constitute the novel. This novel with little plot is difficult to penetrate and understand. As a consequence, it is the least studied and the most poorly understood of all Yi's works of fiction. Accordingly, questions as to why Yi worked on fifteenth-century history once more, how his revised novel drew on similar or different views of the same historical personages and events, and what the imaginative reworking means in light of colonial present still remain unanswered.

Upon close inspection, the overabundant dharma-preaching in *Sejo taewang* functions, surprisingly, as a reminder of controversial issues in the past. They constantly refer to a series of murders, from the usurpation of the throne (Kyeyu chŏngnan) in 1453 and the Sayuksin Incident three years later to the death of the dethroned King Tanjong in 1457. In the novel no one, from Sejo and those immediately surrounding him to his subjects in the rest of the country, forgets what happened in the past. Observing Sejo's Buddhist undertakings, such as the building of temples and the publication of Buddhist sutras, ordinary people think their king intends to avoid retribution for his evil deeds by praying for help from Buddha. They still remember the series of incidents ten years before, when Sejo stole the throne from young King Tanjong, whom he demoted in rank, sent into exile and finally killed. They do not forget that he killed loyal servants of the former king and even his own brothers to secure his political position. Once Suyang becomes king, he rules the country well, and his accomplishments are admired by the people. Some of his controversial policies and violent acts are even forgiven, mainly by blaming the villainous retainers around him. yet, the homicide Sejo committed ten years earlier is neither forgotten nor forgiven by his subjects.

The king Sejo in the novel does not feel free from the heavy burden of the past either. He lost his first son just after he had put the dethroned king to death (in the second year of his reign). His son's death causes him grief but, also a feeling of anxiety that his son paid with his life for his own evil deeds. Yi Kwangsu describes how through his death, Sejo's son skillfully led Sejo to Buddhism (*pangp'yŏn*, 方便). Historically this is not correct, because Sejo had already shown great enthusiasm for Buddhism when he was still a prince helping his father Sejong to compile and publish Buddhist scriptures. The prince's sudden death only deepened Sejo's faith. It is actually Yi Kwangsu who was led to Buddhism through the death of his son; he lost his son Ponggŭn in 1934, in his grief read Buddhist scriptures and experienced a spiritual awakening.[40]

Literary critics tend to interpret Sejo's inclination towards Buddhism in the novel as an expression of repentance, as it probably was in actual history.[41]

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[40] "Ponga-ŭi ch'uŏk 봉아의 추억" in *Insaeng-ŭi hyanggi* 인생의 향기 (Hongji ch'ulp'ansa, 1934). Republished in *Yi Kwangsu chŏnjip* 8, pp.268-269.

[41] Ch'oe Chuhwan 최주환, *Cheguk kwŏllŏg-eŭi yamang-gwa pangam sai-eŏ* 제국 권력에의 야망과 반감

However, upon my observation, the protagonist Sejo in this novel is not simply doing penance for his cruel deeds, and even denies doing so. Whenever Sejo is scared of karmic causality, he soothes his worries, saying "I committed [atrocity] to bring glory to the prosperity of the monarchy and to lead living beings to the right way, not to gratify my desires".[42] The sentiment he expresses here has nothing to do with repentance. It is an excuse for not repenting. His subjects in the novel presume that Sejo has temples constructed and sutras printed in order to expiate his sins or to avoid the revenge of the dead. However, the protagonist himself emphasizes that his Buddhist undertakings are not for that purpose, not for his own sake. They are inspired by his unselfish intention to pray for the repose of his son's soul. He also intends to collect good karma for the kings who preceded and will succeed him; he is not acting out of concern for his own comfort and security.

It is while holding a celebration for the completion of the Wŏn'gak temple that Sejo first realizes that his desire to collect good karma for other kings might be motivated by self-centered concern. As soon as he realizes this, he tries to remove his self-interest and to pray instead that all the karmic benefits associated with his undertakings be fully offered to Buddha and that all living beings will benefit from them. His great sense of vocation, that he was born as a king in order to enlighten and to save the entire people, allows him to avoid thinking about his illness, the death of his son, the vengeful souls of the preceding Koryŏ 高麗 dynasty, and of Nosan'gun (the former King Tanjong), and the others he has killed. Sejo experiences no angst or unease, and even becomes overconfident, comparing himself to the great Indian Buddhist King Asoka. Sejo's son does repentance in place of the king in the novel by copying seven volumes of the *Lotus Sutra* and two of the *Diamond Sutra*. Yet, the king himself barely atones at all for the wrongs he has committed.

In the novel, despite strong objections from his Confucian officials, King Sejo holds Buddhist memorial services for those who were murdered by his hand or at his command. One might think that such mourning is an act of repentance and an expression of remorse for his misdeeds. However, when the Prime Minister Shin Sukchu discretely asks him whether this is the case, Sejo makes clear that he regrets neither the coup nor the executions of the six martyred ministers. Sejo claims that the coup took place at a critical time, and that without his seizure of power, the state could have collapsed, the country been plunged into disorder, and the northern regions been lost to foreign barbarians. He emphasizes how he only seized power for the good of the country, without thinking of his own safety and self-interest. Hearing Sejo's explanation, Sin Sukchu is ashamed because he, in contrast, had striven hard to

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사이에서 (Seoul: Somyŏng ch'ulp'an, 2005), pp. 278-285; Sim Wŏnsŏp 심원섭, "Yi Kwangsu-ŭi posalhaeng sŏwŏn-gwa ch'inil-ŭi munja: haebanggi sanmun-gwa sip'yŏndŭ-rŭl chungsim-ŭro" 李光洙의 菩薩行 誓願과 親日의 問題: 해방기 산문과 시편들을 중심으로 in *Hallim Ilbonhak yŏn'gu* 7 翰林日本學硏究 (Dec. 2002): 68-92.

[42] *Yi Kwangsu chŏnjip* 4, p.504.

win fame and guarantee his own safety, both during that period and afterwards. Sejo goes on to say that he has done what is known in Confucianism as sacrificing one's own life in order to preserve the virtue of benevolence (*salsin sŏng'in*, 殺身成仁), but above all, embody the practices of a bodhisattva (*posalhaeng*, 菩薩行). Like a bodhisattva, Sejo will accept the torments of hell and undergoes *samsara* or reincarnation for the sake of other living beings. Even though Sejo admits responsibility for the murders he committed, he still expresses no remorse and feels no guilt.[43]

What Sejo is more concerned about is not the feelings of unease, anxiety or remorse due to the tragedies of the past, but others' misunderstanding of his intentions. All of his deeds were and are for the sake of others, but his subjects misinterpret his enthusiasm for Buddhist undertakings as acts of repentance. Sejo's servants, too, misread his heart and his selfless sense of purpose. Sejo prays for others, while they believe the king prays for himself. The king is distressed whenever others mistake his intentions.

> *Even in many years to come, there will be people who will accuse me of the crime of killing the former king and [members of the] royal family as well as officials whom previous kings trusted and favored. I have never addressed the issue before in public and I have never wanted to make an excuse for myself. Instead, I will say one thing only. Since the usurpation of the throne, I have never been concerned with my own interests […]. One might think that I desired the throne and hence acted as I did. Others might think that I committed murder because I was heartless […]. However, [the truth is that] it was my duty to my country. Without me the country could have perished. I just wanted to make a better country*.[44]

The reason for the misinterpretation of Sejo's intentions is that he stole the throne. Yet, Sejo argues that becoming a king had nothing to do with his desire for the position. He just believed that without him the country could not be safeguarded.[45] Such a mindset is far removed from feelings of guilt and acts of repentance. But what is more striking is the articulation that the brutal homicide he committed did not result from his greed for the throne but from his spirit of selfless service to his country. This completely overturns the image that Yi had created in *Tanjong aesa*. In the first novel, Yi Kwangsu depicted Suyang as greedy, selfish and ambitious and explained that these character flaws were the origin of the tragedy. In its sequel, Yi depicts Sejo as selfless, courageous and compassionate. The tragic incident that killed Tanjong, as well as princes and loyal officials, was not caused by Sejo's self-interest but, on the contrary, by his selfless sacrifice for the country. To save his country from a crisis in which it could have perished, he went as far as committing the crime of

[43] Ibid., pp.513-517.
[44] Ibid., p.590.
[45] Ibid., p.551.

homicide.

Yi seeks the origins of the tragedy not in Sejo's personality, but elsewhere. First, there were precedents that princes would fight for the throne. Chosŏn's third king, T'aejong 太宗, for instance, had also usurped the throne; Sejo thus followed in his footsteps. Second, a misguided state policy that prohibited princes from taking part in politics worsened the situation. Competent and ambitious princes could not bear to see inept officials administer the country. Third, it is the egoistic and jealous servants who usually stir up the princes. Yi considers these three factors to have caused the tragic events rather than Sejo's desire for the throne. Munjong (Tanjong's father), too, excluded his brothers (including Suyang) from his deathbed. He expressed his last wishes only to his most trusted ministers. These wishes might have included the wise advice to be wary of Suyang's ambition. Regardless of what was said, Yi sees the secrecy as misguided and having the counterproductive effect of angering the prince. The dying king's trusted ministers are not described as trustworthy and loyal as depicted in *Tanjong aesa*, but disparaged as aged and incapable. Evil officials pull the strings of these aged men and prohibit the interference of members of the royal family in politics because they are jealous of the princes' outstanding ability and intelligence. Their motive is simple: hatred of and resentment towards the distinguished princes.

In *Sejo taewang*, Yi Kwangsu takes an approach to Sejo and the origins of the tragedy that is the opposite of the view he had adopted in *Tanjong aesa*. In *Tanjong aesa*, Prince Suyang takes no interest in Confucian studies and shows contempt for them. In *Sejo taewang*, however, the prince is depicted as an intellectual and talented man who becomes the object of jealousy. In *Tanjong aesa* Suyang's bad temperament is held responsible for his misdeeds, whereas in *Sejo Taewang* all blame is shifted from Sejo to a group of "wicked officials": "One should hold the wicked officials responsible for the murder of the young king [Tanjong], rather than Sejo."[46] Why does Yi suddenly change his attitude toward Suyang? Why does he search for a different reason for the historical tragedy, one that makes King Sejo innocent? How are the altered or subverted historical narratives linked to the contemporary colonial reality? What does Yi Kwangsu try to tell us by his changed view of the past?

Tanjong aesa deals with collective colonial events and experiences such as the details of the colonization processes in Korea and the March First Movement, whereas *Sejo taewang* seems to portray Yi's personal experience of living in the changing political landscape of colonial Korea. Still, in his personal and public life he became deeply involved in a series of important events in colonial society. Among them, this second novel tackles the Suyang Tong'uhoe Incident. Suyang Tong'uhoe (The self-cultivation society, 修養同友會) was one of the pivotal Christian national organizations pursuing cultural nationalism in colonial Korean society. In the early 1920s, it was founded by Yi Kwangsu as a

[46] Ibid., p.513.

sister body of An Ch'angho's 安昌浩 Hŭngsadan (Korean Youth Academy) that had been created abroad. As summed up in his essay "Minjok kaejoron," this national organization aimed to cultivate and perfect the moral character of individual Koreans, regarding this as the first step toward social reconstruction and as fundamental to all Korean national movements. As a cultural organization it claimed to stand strictly separated from politics, although its members were allowed personally to engage in political activities. It was a legally recognized organization in colonial Korea and did not openly claim the national goal of independence. Therefore, there is a diversity of opinions about the question whether the organization lost a sense of national purpose or still retained it albeit concealed because of circumstances.

Right before the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937), Yi was arrested by the Japanese police together with about 180 other Tong'uhoe members and imprisoned together with forty-two of the movement's central figures. They were accused of harboring "dangerous thoughts of national independence."[47] This incident is known as the Suyang Tong'uhoe Incident. The incident started when the Japanese police found a pamphlet containing a provocative phrase about the role of Christians in saving the nation from being eliminated and realized that many Tong'uhoe members were behind the affair.[48] According to another account, Yi already had foreseen that the Tong'uhoe would either be forced to shut down or reconstructed into imperial organization like all the other Korean institutions and associations at that time. But before he could reach a tactical decision, this tragic incident befell the association.[49] After six months imprisonment, Yi Kwangsu and An Ch'angho were moved from jail to hospital due to their critical health conditions. An died soon afterwards, and Yi was released on bail. The trial against them took more than four years before all the accused were released in 1941, with a verdict of "not guilty."

Before the Tong'uhoe incident ended, Yi Kwangsu, who was in charge of the national organization, underwent a dramatic change from being a prominent national leader into becoming a fervent pro-Japanese collaborator. In 1939, he paid a consolatory visit to the Japanese Imperial Army in the north. When the directive to adopt Japanese-style family names was imposed upon the Koreans in February 1940, he publicized his Japanese name, Kayama Mitsurō 香山光郎 in the *Maeil sinbo* 每日新報. It was to put the ideology of oneness of Japan and Korea into practice in his own person and to induce his compatriots to change their names. After the Tong'uhoe case was closed, his collaboration became more pronounced. He contributed a considerable number

[47] At that time, the colonial government labeled every little offence as "dangerous thought of national independence" and punished those offenders.

[48] Chang Kyusik 장규식, *Ilcheha Han'guk Kidokkyo minjokjuŭi yŏn'gu* 일제하 한국 기독교민족주의 연구 (Seoul: Hyean, 2001), p.149-150.

[49] Kim Yunsik 김윤식, *Ilche malgi Hanguk chaka-ŭi Inbonŏ kŭnssŭgiron* 일제말기 한국 작가의 일본어 글쓰기론 (Sŏul taehakkyo ch'ulp'anbu, 2003/2004), pp.115-125.

of essays to the Japanese-language governmental newspaper, *Keijō nippō* 京城日報, in which he propagated the wartime ideologies and policies of the colonial government and glorified the Japanese Emperor.

However, Yi's aggressive and blatant collaboration cannot be taken at face value. It contains hidden motives, alternative goals and subversive strategies. Regarding his Japanese name, for example, Yi gave an explanation that Kayama was inspired by Kaguyama 香久山 where Japan's first emperor was enthroned. Adding the character "ro," he also changed his first name in a Japanese way. He argued that the current Korean names were actually following the Chinese-style names. Before the onset of Chinese influence, the Korean ascendants had used names akin to the current Japanese-style of name. His new name was thus argued to revive the ancient indigenous names of his ascendants.[50] However, Kim Wŏnmo argues that Yi's name change was mere camouflage because Yi had already created a similar name much earlier and used it in a letter (1936) and as his pen name for his novel *Sarang* (issued in October 1938). According to Kim, the first two characters "hyangsan" do not refer to Kaguyama but to Myohyangsan, a mountain onto which Tan'gun, Korea's mythical founder, had descended from Heaven. The last character "ro" is also to refer to ancient Silla's *hwarang* warriors. Therefore, the name is considered as nationalistic rather than pro-Japanese.[51]

Kim's new findings are significant in exploring whether Yi's name change was not a simple matter to propagate the colonial government policies. However, the issue of Yi's name change is far more complex than Kim thought in a dichotomous way. Kim argued that Yi's new name had nothing to do with pro-Japanese collaboration, because of its relevance to Tan'gun myth and Silla hwarang. Kim failed to take it into consideration the historical context in which the ancient history revisited by Yi was supposed to prove the Japanese and Korean had the same ancestral origin. So, Yi's new name or name change, although it related to the ancient Korean figure and custom, was undeniably in line with collaboration. The point is thus not whether he collaborated or not but how complex his collaboration was. As clarified in his essay "Ch'angssi-wa na" 創氏와 나 (Name change and me, 1940), Yi supported the *naisen ittai* campaign with his Japanized name, but not for its own sake. He had another intention to remove all barriers of racial discrimination through it.[52] He discussed name change from a Korean's standpoint, not from that of the Japanese authorities. It had to benefit the Koreans' interests in their daily lives. Japanized name was to show loyalty to the Japanese empire but at the same time, to confuse and subvert it. The Japanese authorities forced the Koreans to create Japanese-style

[50] "P'ogp'unggat'ŭn kamgyŏk sog-e "ssi" ch'angsŏr-ŭi sŏngudŭl" 暴風가튼 感激속에 "氏"創設의 先驅들 in *Maeil sinbo* (5 Jan. 1940)

[51] Kim Wŏnmo 金源模, "Yi Kwangsu-ŭi minjok chuŭi-jŏk yŏksa insik" 李光洙의 民族主義的 歷史認識 in *Ch'unwŏn yŏn'gu hakpo* 春園硏究學報 1 (2008), pp.113-115.

[52] "*Maeil sinbo* (20 Feb. 1940)

name but forbade taking real Japanese names because in the eyes of colonial government there was a urgent need to distinguish the names of Koreans and Japanese. Especially names related to the Japanese imperial family were strictly forbidden. It was lèse majesté.[53] Against the regulations on name change, Yi attempted to create a name creating confusion with Japanese and even to relate his name to the Japanese Emperor.

Since I have already briefly mentioned it in the previous chapter, I will not go into detail but Yi's pro-Japanese collaborationist essays published in *Keijō nippō* mainly targeted Japanese readers and were likely to pay lip-service to the colonial authorities or intended to inform the Japanese about how make them hear about how the Koreans thought and felt. They were not texts targeting his compatriots, delivering war propaganda to them. For his Korean readership, Yi attempted to use the Korean language, different writing styles, and different media, including another governmental newspaper *Maeil sinbo* 每日新報, and tried to impart different messages. *Sejo taewang* was such a work designed to communicate with his Korean readers and tell them how the author, Yi Kwangsu, was experiencing the Suyang Tong'uhoe Incident and a political shift toward collaboration. Sejo who personified the Japanese colonizer in *Tanjong aesa*, in this novel represented the author himself. Sejo serves as a reflection of Yi's own interior landscape in the midst of political and personal turmoil. What does Yi express through his fictional character? Was it his feelings of fear, guilt, and repentance for his collaboration as some presume, or his utter shamelessness as more generally assumed?

Yi's portrayal of Sejo as a king who does not deny the crimes he has committed but never reflects on himself nor repents and instead argues that his true motive is misunderstood by the surrounding people sheds light, implicitly and explicitly, on what was going on in Yi's mind: Yi acknowledges that he probably committed the unforgivable act of abandoning his loyalty to the Korean nation and becoming a collaborator. His contemporaries, as well as later generations, would assume that Yi did so out of personal interest and concern for his own safety. His becoming engrossed in Buddhism in parallel with his active collaboration might be understood as an attempt to forget worldly concerns or to expiate his guilt. Contrary to these common presumptions, in *Sejo taewang* he indirectly argues that repentance or remorse was not the feeling he had while posing as a pro-Japanese collaborator. Through Sejo's mouth, Yi reiterates that he and his true motive were misunderstood. His choice of collaboration was never for his own sake. It was intended to benefit others. Without his act of collaboration, others were in danger of losing their lives. In this sense, he argues, his sinful and unforgivable act of collaboration was like the sacrificial act of a bodhisattva, undertaken to save the lives of living beings.

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[53] Mizuno Naoki 水野直樹, *Ch'angssi kaemyŏng: Ilbon-ŭi Chosŏn chibae-wa irŭm-ŭi chŏngch'ihak* 창씨개명:일본의 조선지배와 이름의 정치학, translated by Chŏng Sŏnt'ae (Seoul: San ch'ŏrŏm, 2002), pp.68-70.

The act deserves blame but the true intention behind it is good.

Yi's fictionalized account in the novel does not specify what kind of danger threatened in colonial reality and who were the others he sacrificed himself for. Sejo in the novel intends to safeguard the country but it is not entirely clear if he refers to the Japanese state or the Korean nation, to the Korean people or to some individuals such as the imprisoned Tong'uhoe members. The complex reasoning behind his act of collaboration, which he had to explain using historical metaphors and allegories in his colonial-period novel *Sejo taewang*, could be more directly uttered and be made public after liberation in his confession entitled *Na-ŭi kobaek* 나의 告白 (My confessions, 1948). It is no surprise that in this postcolonial text, Yi raises the subject of fifteenth-century history again and writes that it is correct and good for the nation to admire people like Sŏng Sammun (one of the Six Martyred Ministers) and to criticize people like Sin Sukchu for their betrayal.[54] He claims that, like Sin Sukchu, he himself deserves to be condemned for his pro-Japanese collaboration. However, there is one thing he cannot admit that: he acted out of self-interest. The motive for his collaboration, he argued, was his wish to "preserve the Korean nation" (*minjok pojŏn*, 民族保存) by sacrificing his reputation as a nationalist. He writes that it was a period in which the Koreans were suffering under suppression and would eventually face vengeful massacres if they failed to cooperate in national (read: Japanese Imperial) emergencies.[55] Scenting the danger for the nation, Yi decided that he had to pose as a collaborating Korean nationalist, because such an act was regarded as a yardstick to measure the cooperation of the Koreans. In this text, Yi explains more concretely that it was the Korean nation that was put in peril by the Japanese and for which he sacrificed himself by demonstrating his fervent collaboration with the colonial government. Therefore, he finds no reason for feeling repentance and regret and writing a note of repentance, even though those surrounding him strongly suggested that he do so in the postcolonial era.

Although Yi had allegorized his experience of collaboration and the logic that accompanied it in his *Sejo taewang* and once again explained it in his *Na-ŭi kobaek*, his complicated narratives were neither noticed by the contemporary readers nor convinced the later public. As recorded in the *Panminja choesanggi* 反民者罪狀記 (Record of the charges against national traitors, 1949), it was strongly assumed as a straight fact that Yi had betrayed the Korean nation in pursuit of his own personal welfare and safety.[56] In people's ears, Yi's confession sounded like an excuse or self-justification and disappointed those who expected sincere regret and self-reflection.[57] They were even furious with Yi when he expressed his idea of "collaboration for the sake

[54] *Yi Kwangsu chŏnjip* 7, p.282
[55] Ibid., p.277
[56] Kim Hangmin and Chŏng Unhyŏn 김학민 정운현, *Ch'inilp'a choesanggi* 친일파 죄상기 (Seoul: Hangminsa 학민사, 1993), pp.273-275.
[57] An Pyŏngjik 안병직, "Chakp'um haesŏl 작품해설" in *Yi Kwangsu chŏnjip* 7, p.663.

of the nation." To them, this puzzling insistence was nothing but sophistry or just a convenient and shameless excuse.

Interestingly, the view of scholars is not very different from the public reaction. Since Im Chongguk's pioneering study, there is a growing scholarly interest in Yi's collaboration and his pro-Japanese literature. The initial tendency to condemn him is less pronounced nowadays. Instead of blindly accusing him and disregarding his collaborationist writing, scholars attempt to conduct research into his reasons for collaboration, and into the various discourses Yi used collaborating with the colonial government. They do not dismiss his claim of collaboration for the nation but try to make sense of it.[58] Nonetheless, many tend to end up homogenizing their discussions to the single theme of collaboration, with all of its negative implications, and affirming Yi's self-justification, self-deception, and misperception of self and the colonial ideologies, and his moral deficiencies. Some even claim that Yi's pro-Japanese tendency was not confined to the later years, but actually latent from the beginning.

Buddhism, the true motive for collaboration

Yi's novel *Sejo taewang* suggests that his experience of the Tong'uhoe incident was far more diverse and nuanced than can be accounted for by the uniform narrative of collaboration. It is widely told that during the Tong'uhoe incident, he faced a political choice between colonialism (collaboration) and nationalism and chose the former to solve the incident. Yet, his novel conveys that what followed the incident was more fundamentally to make a choice between politics and morality and between national identity and human life. There were scores of Yi's Tong'uhoe companions who endured the hardship of prison life. Its members such as Yi Yun'gi and Ch'oe Yunho were tortured to death. If Yi proves willing to cooperate with the colonial authorities, he can probably help these men to be released and survive, but he cannot maintain his political loyalty to the Korean nation. If he chooses the Korean nation and nationalism, in a word, politics, Yi should disregard the life of the forty imprisoned members. This would go against humanity. What is more important, the Korean nation or living individuals? More extremely, what is a better choice, to be a national betrayer (collaborator) or be a betrayer of humanity?

To explore the wrenchingly difficult dilemma Yi faced, the choice he

[58] Cho Kwangja 조관자, "'Minjog-ŭi him'-ŭl yŏnmanghan 'ch'inil naesyŏnŏllisŭt'ŭ Yi Kwangsu" '민족의 힘'을 욕망한 '친일 내셔널리스트' 이광수 in *Kiŏk-kwa yŏksa-ŭi t'ujaeng* 기억과 역사의 투쟁 (Seoul: Samin, 2002), pp.322-346; Yi Kyŏnghun, *Yi Kwangsu-ŭi ch'inil munhak yŏn'gu*; Kwak Ŭnhŭi 곽은희, "Hwangminhwa-ŭi hwansang, ododoen kyemong: Yi Kwangsu-ŭi Tongp'o-e koham-ŭl chungsim-ŭro" 皇民化의 환상, 오도된 계몽: 이광수의 <동포에 告함>을 중심으로 in *Minjok munhwa nonch'ong* 31 民族文化論叢 31 (2005):365-393; Jun-Hyeok Kwak, "Domination through Subordination: Yi Kwangsu's Collaboration in Colonial Korea" in *Korea observer* 39.3 (Autumn 2008):427-452.

made, and the philosophy it was based on, one needs to take a closer look at *Sejo taewang*, in particular the writer's condemnation of Confucian virtues and praise of Buddhism. In *Tanjong aesa*, Yi had condemned Suyang's irrepressible greed and held in high regard the Confucian virtues of righteousness and loyalty demonstrated by the six martyred ministers. However, in *Sejo taewang*, the previously highly admired Confucian virtues become a target for condemnation. Confucian statecraft is still seen as a useful political tool to govern the country, while Buddhism is regarded as necessary for the people's moral and spiritual life. To a certain extent, Sejo tries to balance the two religions and to be both a Confucian and a Buddhist king. Yet, from a religious point of view, he ranks Buddhism higher than Confucianism; in Sejo's view, the teachings of Buddha are sufficiently broad to integrate the words of Confucius. He further states that the doctrine of salvation in Buddhism – the principle of saving living beings regardless of one's own life and death – is unthinkable in Confucian moral ethics.

The protagonist Sejo acknowledges the role and value of Confucian principles in parallel with Buddhism as moral teachings. However, these two ends cannot be always met as harmoniously as he intends. The Confucian officials around Sejo, despite being his servants, do not follow Sejo's ideals, looking down on Buddhism and even its well-respected monks. Instead, they cling to the Confucian principle of righteousness, and show envy, arrogance, and contempt towards expressions of Buddhism. The discord between the Buddhist King Sejo and his Confucian officials and thus between Buddhist morality and Confucian politics becomes increasingly tense in the wake of the Tanjong incident. Sejo and his Confucian officials had killed Nosan'gun (the former King Tanjong), advocating this course of action in the name of greater righteousness (*taeŭi,* 大義). It was against Confucian principle to have two kings in a country; therefore, the dethroned king was seen as deserving to die. Ten years later, the Confucian officials still see nothing wrong with the Confucian principle they appealed to when killing the former king. Sejo, however, who has become a sincere Buddhist, comes to have a different insight into the event:

> *The current Confucian scholars maintain that the murder follows the Confucian principle of justice (ŭi, 義), but the future generation of Confucian scholars will rebuke it as a violation of justice. If so, what is justice on earth?*[59]

Sejo points out that Confucian principles invoked cannot be a perpetual truth which can be called upon anytime and anywhere. He sees that Confucianism as a political philosophy is relative rather than absolute, showing how its interpretations vary according to the time, in particular for political purposes. The later Sejo sharply criticizes the Confucian rhetoric of greater righteousness as a crime against humanity. From a Buddhist moral point of

[59] *Yi Kwangsu chŏnjip* 4, p.515.

view, he denounces the Confucian political concept of justice as a mere pretext for self-deception and for masking the sin of murder. Whatever the excuse, Buddhism as a moral code makes it clear that murder remains murder and can never be justified as a righteous act. Thus Sejo in the novel condemns himself and his accomplices as sinners who have killed the previous king, members of the royal family and loyal servants of the state.

Sejo's criticism of the notion of Confucian righteousness in the novel shows how the writer's view has completely changed. In *Tanjong aesa*, Confucian officials represent righteousness and are admired, whereas Suyang is denounced for his self-interest and hunger for power. In *Sejo taewang* it is the Confucian officials who are criticized for their self-interest and hunger for fame. The righteousness they advocate is denounced as mere rhetoric to justify the crime of murder. In contrast, King Sejo is depicted as far from greedy and self-interested. The Buddhist king is described as the only one who can see and tell the perdurable truth and safeguard humanity as an absolute truth in confrontation with the political purposes of the wicked officials.

This changed view of Confucianism in *Sejo taewang* reflects Yi's political transformation under contemporary colonial rule. When Yi wrote *Sejo taewang* in 1939-40, he had been implicated in the Tong'uhoe incident and had begun to collaborate with the Japanese wartime government. Under the circumstances he deliberately, perhaps unavoidably, broke his pledge of political loyalty to the Korean nation. Therefore, he no longer could honor the Confucian virtues of loyalty and righteousness which allegorize the spiritual strength of the Korean nation. But Yi's criticism of Confucianism and praise of Buddhism is far more than a humble apology for his disloyal conduct. It more importantly reflects a dilemma between national politics and morality he underwent during the Tong'uhoe Incident, his choice of moral principles based on his Buddhist belief, and furthermore, his reflection from a religious (Buddhist) perspective on and disillusionment with nationalist movements.

It is still an untold fact that Yi started reconsidering the role and meaning of nationalism under the influence of Buddhism. As a recognized cultural nationalist, he had firmly believed that the national interest and national goals were the most important matters in his personal and public life. Yet, while suffering a potentially fatal illness at the end of the 1920s and the death of his son in 1934, Yi gradually came to realize that the most important of human problems is the matter of life and death (neither nation nor nationalism) and that facing impending death everything, including one's desire for fame and material gain and artistic (political/nationalist) aspirations, loses its meaning. The only thing left is religiosity.[60] Nationalism could not explain why he had to undergo such unbearable physical pain on the operation table. It could not offer any explanation about the death of his dear son. It was not

[60] Yi Kwangsu, "P'yepyŏng sasaeng 15-nyŏn" 肺病死生 十五年 in *Samch'ŏlli* (Feb. 1932); -------, "Susultae wi-esŏ" 수술대 위에서 in *Munye kongnon* 文藝公論 (July 1929).

nationalism but Buddhism, in his case, which dealt with these fundamental questions of life and death.

In his essay "Chilli-ŭi sangdaesŏng" 眞理의 相對性 (The relativity of truth, 1933) written after experiencing fatal illness, Yi more clearly articulated that national politics cannot be considered as most important, surpassing all the others but it must be religion. He explains that there are two kinds of truths: one is an absolute truth. The other is a relative truth. The truths of science and religion dealing with the problem of life and death are seen as the absolute truth, whereas "as far as the nation and the nation's political, social and economic interests are concerned, they look entirely relative."[61] He saw the reality that nation-state cling to their own relative truths and so become involved in disputes and lamented that to settle these disputes, those countries tend to resort to (military) power instead of transnational (*ch'o minjok-chŏk*) or transcendental imperatives like religion. Yi did not deny the value of national ideology. He was still the top leader of a self-reconstruction nationalist movement at this point of time. But as expressed through fictional and non-fictional writings, Yi limited the role and meaning of national ideology and practice as political and of relative importance, whereas he considered religions like Buddhism as absolute importance above and beyond national boundaries.

Nationalist and Buddhist identities probably co-existed in Yi's mind side by side as in *Sejo taewang* Sejo first tries to pursue Confucian and Buddhist principles. However, it was some years later that Yi experienced in person a violent clash between them. It was the Tong'uhoe incident which Yi allegorizes as the Tanjong Incident in *Sejo taewang*. The fictional confrontation between the Buddhist king Sejo and the Confucian officials reveals Yi's inner conflict between Buddhist morality and national politics during the Tong'uhoe incident. His nationalism (represented by the Confucian officials) argues that the individual Tong'uhoe members (Tanjong in the novel) deserve to die and it is the right way justice prevails for the bigger purpose of national independence. On the contrary, his Buddhist morality represented by the Buddhist king Sejo makes him think that the lives of his companions compatriots are of utmost importance, that he should save those individuals and prevent them from meeting death in jail, and that this Buddhist imperative of salvation comes before national interests and goals. Although he theoretically knew religious morality as the most important of all ideologies and matters, it was still extremely difficult to put it into practice without any hesitance.

Yi's dilemma of choosing either the nation or the life of individuals very much resembles the question of apostasy Endō Shūsaku 遠藤周作 deals with in his religious novel titled *Chinmoku* 沈默 (Silence, 1966).[62] This novel thematizes Portuguese Catholic missionaries suffering from fierce persecution

[61] In *Ilsa Irŏn* 一事一言. Republished in *Yi Kwangsu chŏnjip* 9, p.353.
[62] With regard to Endō Shūsaku's novel, I refered to the studies by Sin Ikho, *Munhak-kwa chonggyo-ŭi mannam*, pp.115-130; Im Yŏngch'ŏn, *Munhak-kwa chonggyo*, pp.173-209.

in sixteenth-century Japan. Christians are put into jail by the local authorities, where they are tortured and many of them die. Foreign priests (among whom was one Father Rodrigues) are forced to step on a picture of Christ. By doing so, they symbolically demonstrate their apostasy from the church in exchange for the lives of Japanese Catholics. Hearing groans and seeing people dying, Father Rodrigues is faced with the dilemma of whether he should die as a martyr for his faith or become an apostate by treading on a painting of Christ and in so doing save the Japanese Catholics from more suffering. Through this novel, Endō Shūsaku questions what is a right decision and the true expression of faith. Is it right to choose Christ and church without helping the suffering believers? Or is it the better decision to save the lives of believers by betraying Christ and church? Intriguingly, the dilemma between Christ (church) and believers is analogous to the choice between the nation and the lives of some Koreans in Yi's mind.

Then, what was Yi's choice? *Sejo taewang* shows his resolve to save the lives of Tong'uhoe members in jail instead of sticking to his patriotic nationalism for the nation's sake. It was not a sudden and impulsive decision, but a decision motivated by his Buddhist belief. He followed the absolute imperative of Buddha that one should respect life and that nothing has a higher priority. As Confucian officials allegorically demonstrate in the novel, politics, even if is associated with the national interest and goals, often are for the selfish pursuit of a nation's interests against the interests of the other nations. When it confronted with the universal value of humanity, politics tend to subordinate humanity to political purposes. Using Sejo's Buddhist point of view, however, Yi flatly opposed the subordination of human life to political considerations and purposes. Yi ranked Buddhist respect of for human life higher than a political ideology for the sake of nation. Through Sejo's mouth, he articulated that Buddhist universalism is bigger than political nationalism and nationalist ideology cannot imagine or comprehend the deep meaning of respect for life in Buddhism. Accordingly, faced with colonial reality, his choice was to follow the Buddhist doctrine and to respect the lives of Tong'uhoe members.

Yi's Buddhist-inspired decision with regard to the Suyang Tong'uhoe case and collaboration as its consequence is more clearly expressed in the preface of his postcolonial text *Na-ŭi kobaek*:

> *For what reason did I pose as pro-Japanese? [...] The reason was, in short, to save my companions in need, even though I had to make sacrifices and even though I could save only a few […]. I simply felt an affinity to the Buddhist imperative that if you can save even one living being in exchange for your life, you must consider yourself fortunate.*[63]

Buddhism played a crucial role in his decision to collaborate. However,

[63] *Yi Kwangsu chŏnjip* 10, p.539

its role was not to simply serve as a means to support his pro-Japanese political stance and to create a wartime colonial ideology as some scholars assume.[64] What Buddhism taught was the importance of human lives. It encouraged him to save some individuals, even though it meant to go against the Korean nation and allying himself with the Japanese colonial government. Politics, whether in the form of nationalism or of colonialism (collaboration), was not the main concern for Yi. As articulated in the quote above, his real concern was with following the Buddhist moral view of the value of human life and putting the Buddhist imperative into action under any political circumstance.

Intriguingly, Han Yongun, known as an undaunted nationalist, shared this Buddhist view of respect for life with Yi Kwangsu, who posed as pro-Japanese. As discussed in the previous chapters, Han also had strong views about Buddhism as being beyond and above political ideologies. Against its role as a political tool in service to the nation, he argued that Buddhism was central and fundamental to all ideologies and discourses. Han, too, although in a slightly different way, experienced the inner conflict between morality and politics in his later years just like Yi. Han preferred morality and human value to politics, claiming that all acts of compassion are equally great, regardless of the object of that compassion and stating that, "a sacrifice made for the state and society is not more valuable than a sacrifice made for an individual".[65] Of course, Yi's choice in many ways was more extreme than Han's. This is probably because the conflict, distress and political pressure Yi Kwangsu had to face, as revealed in the concrete historical incident of Suyang Tong'uhoe, were more violent and intense than what Han Yongun experienced. Yi's choice was not merely to be faithful to Tong'uhoe members, as Han was to his benefactors, but to save their lives by directly and actively appealing to the colonial government.

For that purpose, Yi professed to be pro-Japanese and adopted a Japanese-style surname earlier than anyone else. He participated in overt collaboration and stood in the vanguard of spreading wartime ideologies. Doing so, he abandoned his political loyalty to the Korean nation. Still, it was probably not easy to forget his previous attachment to nationalist movements all at once, as shown allegorically in the novel in which the later Sejo desperately struggles to disentangle himself from all the complications of his past life. It was as if he just forgot about it. When he embraced Buddhism, he repositioned the role and meaning of national ideology and practice as political and relative and practically came to question his allegiance to the nation when the Tong'uhoe incident took place. Yi became skeptical about the concept of nation and was disillusioned with national politics. This was again closely connected to central Buddhist notion: *sunyata* (*kong*, 空).

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[64] Yi Kyŏnghun, *Yi Kwangsu-ŭi ch'inil munhak yŏn'gu*; Kwak Ŭnhŭi, "Hwangminhwa-ŭi hwansang, ododoen kyemong".

[65] *Han Yongun chŏnjip* 韓龍雲全集 6 (Seoul: Pulgyo munhwa yŏn'guwŏn, 2006), p.288.

In *Sejo taewang*, Yi cited a considerable number of phrases and expressions from Buddhist scriptures, but it is obvious that the citations relating to the Buddhist concept of *sunyata* are dominant, which means that Yi emphasizes its importance in this novel. The term *sunyata* is translated as emptiness or nothingness but its meaning is more profound. It expresses the ontological truth that all phenomena are themselves empty and dependently related to other phenomena. However, this was not the way Yi understood it. As Saegusa Toshikatsu points out, Yi underlined the philosophically abstract meaning that the world is transient, void and incomplete. Saegusa sees in this an analogy with emotions that was characterized by feelings of resignation and of the emptiness and meaninglessness of life and further assumes that this was the feeling behind his act of collaboration.[66]

To my thinking, however, there is something more than emotional release involved. The recurrent notions of emptiness (*kong*, 空), illusions (*hwan*, 幻), and dreams (*mong*, 夢) are linked to the central theme of the novel: the memories of the murders Sejo committed when seizing power. These notions crop up as a way of viewing and settling those tragic remembrances. Settling Sejo's past is the key part of the novel. Confucian officials, on the one hand, mask the incidents; Sejo, on the other hand, tries to reconcile himself with the tragic past by holding a Buddhist memorial service for his victims. Sŏlcham Kim Sisŭp 雪岑 金時習, who is one of the *saengyuksin* 生六臣 (six living loyal officials) who remained loyal to the former king Tanjong but abandoned their offices, leads the ceremony. In charge of resolving the unforgivable sin of homicide, Sŏlcham preaches that living beings in their mind stir up judgments of good and evil and emotions of grief and joy. Such things do not really exist; They are all false images created in the mind. They are nothing but dreams and illusions. Emphasizing the notions of *sunyata*, non-self and no-rising-and-falling, Sŏlcham comforts the deceased and attempts to settle Sejo's complicated relationship with the tragic past.

Sejo's attempt at reconciliation with the ghosts of his past life allegorizes Yi's desperate struggle to reconcile and settle his past life as a nationalist. As the leader of Suyang Tong'uhoe, Yi had served the nation as if it were his God and had led a life dedicated to the self-cultivation movement for over fifteen years. As Korea's most popular writer, through his writings he had tried to help his compatriots construct a vision of their community (a united nation) as a group where they would feel they belonged. He had firmly believed that the self-cultivation movement was the fundamental way for the Korean people to strengthen their spiritual moral capacity and in the end achieve the national goal. And now, to save the life of his compatriots, leading his present life as a self-claimed collaborator,[67] he all of sudden needed to

[66] Saegusa Toshikatsu 三枝壽勝, "Yi Kwangsu-wa Pulgyo" in *Saegusa kyosu-ŭi Han'guk munhak yŏn'gu*, Trans. Sim Wŏnsŏp (Seoul: Pet'ŭlpuk, 2000), pp.212-216.

[67] In *Na-ŭi kobaek*, Yi discussed the issue of his collaboration under the rubric of "why did I become a

dissolve the nation and devalue nationalist movements. The heavy burden of the past kept weighing on his mind, in the same way in the novel Sejo all the time carries the past memories he cannot forget. Nor were the nation and nationalism something he could just forget about. To placate the ghosts of his troubled past life, he needed to know what they truly were and what they purpose they served.

The Buddhist monk Sŏlcham and his sermon about *sunyata* in the novel indicate that Yi found his answers to these questions with the help of Buddhist teachings. The Buddhist notion of *sunyata*, in particular, made him realize that none of them are substantial and fundamental by nature. They are all creations of the mind. The concept of nation and the significance of the nationalist movement that he has firmly believed in as his ultimate truth from the Buddhist perspective turn out to be all illusions which obscured truth and reality, instead of bringing them to light. The illusion of his nationalist gospel made him believe that the concept of nation was of the greatest importance, because it united all the Koreans on an equal footing. It is supposed to represent the Koreans as a whole. Korean nationalism was supposed to resolve all the problems under colonial circumstances and to fight for human dignity and justice on behalf of the Koreans. In particular, the self-cultivation movement among various national movements he believed to be the way to bring a fundamental change to the Korean people, because it was aimed to improve their moral character.

However, Buddhism disenchanted Yi's nationalized mind and made him to see what reality and truth really are. As featured in the Tong'uhoe incident, the concept of the nation did not only unite the Koreans but also discriminated them. The interests and goals of the nation did not always represent those of individual Koreans. When nationalism was confronted with individuals' lives and rights, it often controlled and subjugated them to its own political purposes under the pretext of fighting for national justice and freedom against colonialism, just as the Confucian officials in the novel conceal the fact of homicide and justify on the basis of Confucian principle of great righteousness. Yi's own self-reconstruction movement aiming to improve personal morality did not serve human dignity during the Tong'uhoe incident. Only Buddhism advocated the sanctity of human life and the dignity of persons as the absolute truth Yi and others should never lose sight of at any time. Seen from a Buddhist moral perspective, nation and nationalism were a dehumanizing force, tempting Yi to violate basic human rights and to disregard human dignity for the sake of the nation.

Yi's skepticism about the concept of nation and criticism of Korean nationalism were more directly addressed in his non-fictional texts written around the same time. In 1940, he published an article "Chosŏn munhak-ŭi

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ch'inilp'a (pro-Japanese)?" He did not deny that he was a collaborator. He found the reason why more important.

ch'amhoe" (朝鮮文學의 懺悔, Repentance for Korean literature, 1940) in *Maeil sinbo*. In this essay, Yi looks back on his lifelong creation of literary works and expresses remorse. It is not because they were poorly written. It is because of the underlying ideology he has clung to. This he clearly identifies as the concept of the nation (*minjok kwannyŏm*, 民族觀念). He states that his conversion to religion (Buddhism) in 1934 made him realize that the nation is a confusing and erroneous concept. So, he disowned his past writings as affected by confusion and errors and decided to write taking the correct view of Buddhism as an alternative literary ideology. He remarks that his novel *Sejo taewang* as well as his novella "Mumyŏng" 無明 (Ignorance, 1939), *Sarang* 사랑 (Love, 1939), and *Ch'unwŏn sigajip* 春園詩歌集 (A collection of poems by Ch'unwŏn, 1940) were written with this intention. This essay confirms Yi's disillusion with the concept of the nation under the influence of Buddhism and the fact that his novel *Sejo taewang* is associated with this change of mind. Yet, he does not explain further why the concept of the nation is seen as erroneous from a Buddhist standpoint and what doctrines in Buddhism exactly triggered his negative feelings, which he explained in greater detail in metaphors in *Sejo taewang*.

Yi's long autobiographical essay "Yukchanggi" 鬻庄記 (Selling a villa, 1939) is another important text in which his skepticism with regard to the nationalist enterprise is succinctly articulated:[68]

> *Anyhow, I have struggled to be a practitioner of the Lotus Sutra during the six years since I built this house. I realized the fleetingness of the nationalist movement and the hopelessness of the moral cultivation movement, which I have led for more than ten years. Of course, ideologically, it is progress that I perceive the moral cultivation movement as the more proper way to rescue the Korean people than political activities. Notwithstanding, through my own experiences I have realized that moral cultivation is useless if it is not rooted in religious belief.*[69]

Yi confesses that Buddhism offered him critical insights into nationalism and nationalist movements and made him reflect on his past engagement with them. When he wrote this essay, he still thought that the moral cultivation movement he chose was a better approach to save the Koreans than political activities such as the armed independence movements or a socialist revolution. Yet, through his own experience, Yi came to realize that the character building movement, too, cannot provide a fundamental set of solutions. He personally strove for more than a decade to stand by the main principles of this moral cultivation movement. His efforts, not to lie, to keep promises, to be aware of one's responsibilities, to work on behalf of the community, and to love and respect others in everyday life, however, could not

[68] In *Munjang* 文章 (Sep. 1939).
[69] *Yi Kwangsu chŏnjip* 8, p.43.

remove his deep-rooted desires (*t'amsim*, 貪心) and passions (*pŏnnoe*, 煩惱).[70] The moral improvement movement only polished the surface of his personality and could not solve fundamental human questions regarding human suffering and life and death. More importantly, his own experience of the Suyang Tong'uhoe Incident made him realize that nationalist movements tend to prioritize things the Korean nation needs, at the expense of the sanctity of human life. Only religion, in his case Buddhism, offered answers to the fundamental human questions and assured him of the ultimate importance of humanity.

Yi's disillusionment with nation, national identity and the nationalist movement is certainly relevant to his ensuing collaboration, but it is not an absurd and self-deceptive excuse for his political decision, as some nationalist scholars assume. A set of myths constituted the Korean nation and nationalism. In the formulation of Benedict Anderson, the nation is an "imagined community," national identities and nationalism are socially constructed through vehicles like print-capitalism. Yi was one of the intellectuals in colonial Korea who conjured up and propagated the modern construct of the nation among the Korean public through his literary writings. However, as recent postnationalist and postcolonial scholarship more and more unveils, there were many social agents in colonial reality who cannot be homogenized to a monolithic nation and whose interests and life goals were too diverse and complex to be reduced to those of Korean nationalism.[71] It was not a description of reality but close to myth that Korean nationalism resolved all the problems the Korean people had under colonial circumstances and always fought for freedom on behalf of all Koreans. Within the myth of one nation, individual Koreans, in particular Korean women, were often discriminated against and deprived of their freedoms and human rights. Nationalist movements turned out to copy the aggressive, dehumanizing and domineering manner of their imperialist oppressors.[72] As will be discussed later, other contemporary Buddhist writers also criticized Korean nationalist movements for their aggression and hypocrisy, even earlier than Yi did.

Maybe one last question is left now: did Yi collaborate only for the sake of the nation? Does his statement "I don't feel the slightest morsel of shame in saying that I lived and died for the nation"[73] reflect the truth that he had always kept in mind? His novel *Sejo taewang* and some other colonial-period texts tell

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[70] Ibid.

[71] Henry H. Em, "Minjok as a Modern and Democratic Construct: Sin Ch'aeho's Historigraphy" in *Colonial Modernity in Korea*, edited by Gi-Wook Shin and Michael Robinson (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1999), pp.336-361; Clark Sorensen, "National Identity and the Creation of the Category "Peasant" in Colonial Korea" in Ibid, pp.288-310; Joong-Seop Kim, "In Search of Human Rights: The Paekchŏng Movement in Colonial Korea" in *Ibid*, pp.311-335.

[72] Prasenjit Duara (ed), *Decolonization:perspectives from now and then* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), p.7; Elaine H. Kim and Chungmoo Choi (ed), *Dangerous Women: Gender & Korean nationalism* (New York: Routledge, 1998).

[73] "Ingwa 因果" in an unpublished manuscript of the collection of poems *Nae Norae* 내노래.

that this is not true. The truth more correctly should be phrased as "collaboration for the sake of some individual Koreans," not for the nation's sake. The concept of the nation was dissolved and doubted from a religious moral standpoint when he came to pose as pro-Japanese collaborator. It was only after the liberation in 1945 that Yi restored the idea of the nation from oblivion. In his postcolonial text *Na-ŭi kobaek*, for example, he emphasizes how important the self-cultivation movement was and how the movement shared a common destiny with the Korean nation. Therefore, if the Tong'uhoe would have been dissolved and its leading members met their deaths, the movement would have ceased to be. It would have meant that the life of the nation had come to an end. For the survival of the nation, Yi felt responsible for the rescue of the Tong'uhoe's leaders, he claimed after the war.[74]

This postcolonial-period explanation differs from what Yi experienced and told in his colonial-period texts such as *Sejo taewang*. The individual deaths of members of the national elite cannot be equated with the death of the nation. As depicted in his novel *Sejo taewang*, the value of individual lives was, on the contrary, juxtaposed with the death of the nation. The self-cultivation movement was seen as no more than a superficial remedy for the Koreans, which could not redeem even a single life and which threatened living individuals as much as Japanese colonialism. His previous disillusionment with and criticism of nationalist interests and goals was however thoroughly silenced in his postcolonial confession. In his novel, he emphasized and prioritized his Buddhist belief and the Buddhist doctrine of saving living beings, at the expense of the nation and national politics. Buddhism which offered a critical insight into the dehumanizing force of nationalism is largely obscured in *Na-ŭi kobaek*. In this postcolonial text, Yi's focus is clearly reoriented from Buddhism to politics. The nation and the self-cultivation movement, which were questioned and devalued in previous days, re-emerged and were re-evaluated.

I am not claiming that Yi's *Na-ŭi kobaek* is an untrustworthy confession or a complete lie. This is basically a "postcolonial" representation in which memories of the colonial past are reconstructed from the perspective of the postcolonial present. It means that the reconstructed colonial past in this text tells more about Yi's experience of living in the postcolonial era of Korea than about his life in the colonial period. His postcolonial insistence on "collaboration for the sake of the nation" is thus to meet the needs of the new age in which the Korean nation-state was being built. The real story behind his experience of the Suyang Tong'uhoe Incident and collaboration in wartime colonial Korea was that he renounced the nation and started pro-Japanese collaboration in order to save the real subjects of the imagined community of the nation, as he articulated in a fictionalized form in *Sejo taewang*.

[74] *Yi Kwangsu chŏnjip* 7, p.274.

Conclusion

Yi Kwangsu's novel *Tanjong aesa* and *Sejo taewang* show that religion played a significant role in his life, literature, cultural-nationalist movements, and collaborationist activities. Among the various religions he took an interest in, Confucianism and Buddhism were explicitly invoked in those two historical novels to speak about the collective colonial experience, such as the colonization of Korea and the March First Movement (in *Tanjong aesa*) and to cope with his personal and public life events such as the Suyang Tong'uhoe Incident and its consequences like engaging in collaboration (in *Sejo taewang*). Both religions offered messages with profound implications. Confucianism invoked in the first novel was not merely to bolster nationalism. It was to revise the nationalist discourse illustrated in his early treatise "Minjok kaejoron," which claimed that the Koreans were morally deficient and needed to strengthen their character. In *Tanjong aesa*, the ascription of Korean's inferiority and Japanese's superiority was denounced as a false ideology and subverted. Confucianism was utilized to reveal the moral inferiority of Japanese colonialism and to reinstate the moral and spiritual strength of the Korean people.

Buddhism in *Sejo taewang* brought to light the most controversial issue of Yi Kwangsu: his pro-Japanese collaboration. His Buddhist belief was not a mere politicized means to justify his decision of collaboration. Nor was it to solely express his remorse for his wrongdoing as some sympathetic scholars tend to think. It provided a much more detailed and nuanced story behind his political decision showing that he was caught in a dilemma between the nation and human life. Buddhism taught him the fundamental value of the life of each person and the profound meaning of salvation. So, he chose not to commit crimes against humanity, preferring to be a sinner against the nation. He preferred humanity and morality to politics (in the shape of nationalist interests and movements) and did not feel remorse for his ethical choice. Furthermore, his early ideas on nation and nationalism, which had been revised in *Tanjong aesa*, were questioned more thoroughly in its follow-up novel. From a Buddhist moral standpoint, he criticized aggressive and dehumanizing nationalism.

After completing *Sejo taewang*, Yi Kwangsu embarked on more blatant collaboration with the Japanese colonial government. This was at first motivated by his Buddhist ethical imperative of saving human beings, but as time goes by tended to deviate from its humanitarian principles. During the Pacific War, he encouraged Korean students to enlist in the imperial army and to die for the Japanese Empire. Although he argued later in the postcolonial era that what he really meant was that they would fight and die for the Korean nation, nothing changes from a humanitarian point of view. While collaborating with the wartime colonial government and rebuilding the Korean nation-state after the liberation, he unconsciously took after the historical Sejo in sinning against the absolute truth for humanity, and thereby repeated the same kind of historical tragedy.