Constructing a Buddhist Imaginary in Colonial Korea
(1910-1945)

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ABSTRACT

Studies on Korean Buddhism under Japanese colonialism (1910-1945) often focus on political issues. However, inadequate attention has been given to Korean Buddhists’ use of the new media. Han Yongun (1879-1944) is famous as a would-be reformer, political figure, and poet. But he was also a key Buddhist figure in the new media. His reform agenda would have been unimaginable without it. This paper sketches critical features of the new media in Korean Buddhism during the colonial era, focusing on the need for would-be reformers to imagine Buddhism in the lives of adherents. I commence with an overview of early Buddhist publishing efforts, before turning to an analysis of the 1919 “Declaration of Korean Buddhist Priests.” I then examine the context of Han’s work as well as his last major publication. Ultimately, this paper concludes that while mass publication allowed for the construction of a Buddhist imaginary, it also underscored the difficulties in articulating a vision of how Buddhism might function in a modernising society.

1. INTRODUCTION

Studies on Korean Buddhism under Japanese colonialism (1910-1945) often focus on plans for reforming institutional Buddhism, Japanese influences, and Buddhists’ involvement in the independence movement. However, with the notable exception of Sørensen (1990), inadequate attention has been given to Korean Buddhists’ use of the new media (i.e., journals and newspapers).

Han Yongun (1879-1944) is famous as a would-be reformer, political figure, and poet. But he was also a key Buddhist figure in the new media. His reform agenda would have been unimaginable without it, and throughout his career he employed the new media for Buddhist purposes. Indeed, he arguably exploited the potential of print and mass publication more fully than any of his peers. This paper takes Han as an example to examine the function of the new media in Korean Buddhism during the colonial era.

I commence with a sketch of early Buddhist publication, and then turn to an analysis of the 1919 “Declaration of Korean Buddhist Priests,” a document delivered to the 1919 Paris Peace Conference. I argue that the “1919 Declaration” highlights two principal difficulties confronting Korean Buddhist activists: first, difficulty with envisioning Buddhism apart from the state; and second, difficulty in imagining how Buddhism could or should function amid changing social conditions. Han’s private notes are then examined to illuminate the difficulties in which he worked and to contextualise his publishing and writing activities from the 1920s. Ultimately, this paper concludes that while mass publication allowed for the construction of a Buddhist imaginary, it also underscored the difficulties in articulating a vision of how Buddhism might function in a modernising society.
2. CONTEXTUALISING BUDDHIST PRINT IN COLONIAL KOREA

By the time Japan formally annexed Korea in 1910, it was no longer possible for Korean reformers and activists, whatever their political orientations or religious loyalties, to ignore the potentialities of the people at large. Though cultural nationalists/gradualists and the more radical agitators for independence agreed on little else during the colonial period, they at least tacitly agreed on the necessity of involving the people for social, political, and cultural change. Print was central to such broad social involvement. Moreover, this shared recognition of the need to expand political constituencies and loyalties was as much a consequence of print as a cause for exploiting print to specific ends.

In this respect, the Korean case presents a variation of Anderson’s thesis on the relationship between print-capitalism and nationalism (1986, esp. 40-49). In Korea, print-capitalism did not organically lead to nationalism and linguistic levelling or the vernacularisation of writing (i.e., “unification of speech and writing”) across social classes. Rather, nationalism, in its early stages, underscored the importance of print used in conjunction with the vernacular, which in turn led to the growth of print-capitalism. This is not altogether surprising. The emphasis on uniformity between speech and writing developed only in the late nineteenth century, in reaction to the failure of the China-centred Chosŏn (1392-1910) state and largely under the influence of the western-inspired reforms undertaken in Meiji Japan (1868-1912).

Korean Buddhists, both clerical and lay, quickly took advantage of the burgeoning print-capitalism for religious and cultural purposes, and on balance, the world of Buddhist publications was rather small. Although it is difficult to determine the reach and influence of Korean Buddhist publications during the Japanese colonial period (1910-1945), it is nevertheless clear that they competed for advertisements and thus competed against each other as well as other print media. Competition partly explains three general features of these Buddhist publications. First, many were short lived, in some cases barely making it past the first issue, while others were disbanded and then restarted under the same or a different name, thus leading to great confusion, as in the case of Pulgyo (Buddhism)/Sin Pulgyo (New Buddhism) (Kim and Yi 1996, 17-19). Second, failed journals seem to have served as a training ground for later, more successful ventures. Third and most importantly, these publications would increasingly tend to carry articles on a broad range of topics. It seems safe to assume that this indicated a desire to attract a broader readership, or at least that the economic lessons of the 1910s had been learnt.

The careers of Han Yongun (1879-1944) and Kwôn Sangno (1879-1965) illustrate these points. Both acted as editors for Buddhist journals in the first decade of Japanese colonial rule, that is, before the easing of publishing restrictions that occurred under Japan’s policy of “cultural rule,” implemented in the aftermath of Korea’s March First Movement of 1919. Kwôn preceded Han, serving as editor and publisher of The Korean Buddhist Monthly (Chosŏn Pulgyo wŏlbo), which ran for nineteen issues from early in 1912 to late in 1913 (Kim and Yi 1996, 26-28). Han, too, acted as editor and publisher in his first venture, Mind Only (Yusim), which survived for only three issues during the final quarter of 1918 (ibid., 45-46). On the face of it, The Korean Buddhist Monthly was relatively more successful. But unlike Han’s Mind Only, Kwôn had significant institutional backing.

Kim and Yi ascribe the failure of The Korean Buddhist Monthly to a refusal to publish anything related to politics, since, according to the journal’s explicit editorial policy, it would treat only “simple religious issues [lit., qualities]” (tansunhan chonggyo sŏngjil) (Kim and Yi 1996, 28). However, it is questionable to say that The Korean
Buddhist Monthly was entirely non-political. It was sponsored by a Korean Buddhist organisation which had aligned itself with the Japanese by agreeing, in 1910, to a merger between Korean Buddhism and the Sōtō Sect of Japanese Buddhism. If nothing else, such an affiliation made the journal implicitly political. Moreover, in nineteen issues from 1912 to 1914, it serialised Kwôn’s On the restoration of Korean Buddhism (Chosŏn Pulgyo kaehyŏngnon), a plan for Korean Buddhist reform. Kwôn’s Restoration was clearly written in response to Han Yongun’s Treatise on the reformation of Korean Buddhism (Chosŏn Pulgyo yusillon) which had been completed in 1910 and was published in 1913. Whereas Han, the would-be radical reformer, argued for sudden and thoroughgoing change to Korean Buddhism as a whole—an idea exemplified in his proposal that priests and nuns be allowed to marry—Kwôn took a far more conservative position and counselled the virtues of caution and respect for Korea’s Buddhist traditions (Yang 1993, 163; cf. Park 2007, 22).

The fact that both Han’s Mind Only and Kwôn’s Korean Buddhist Monthly folded suggests the limitations of political explanations. There clearly were not enough readers for journals run by either a radical or a conservative reformer. Therefore, it would seem that, rather than politics, the critical factor was the print-capitalistic environment in which these journals had to function. Indeed, this point is clearly underscored in the failure of Kwôn’s institutionally-backed Korean Buddhist Monthly.

But were there many potential readers to begin with, that is, what was the nature and extent of literacy in the years leading to and during the Japanese Colonial Period? This is a thorny question if one attempts to interpret the meaning of the existing figures. A literacy survey undertaken by the Japanese Government-General in 1930 suggests that well over half the population was illiterate in Korean (reprinted in Kimura 1993, 641-642). The measurement for literacy also had a low baseline, asking whether the respondents knew the Korean alphabet. There is, of course, nothing historically uncommon about defining literacy by such a standard (i.e., some basic knowledge of a given script). Moreover, it is obvious that there would have been a broad range in levels of literacy throughout the population. However, commercial publication can be taken as an indirect measure of literacy. (On this question in the Japanese context, see Rubinger 2007.)

Whatever the precise numbers, it is certain that by roughly 1912, there was a sufficiently large readership to support an increasingly robust commercial publishing industry. But publication during the 1910s was characterised by a curious contrast among what was published, how it was published, and the effects of publication (Kwôn 1990). First, modern western printing technology for movable type was imported from Japan, but the economic efficiency of this technology was maximised in the printing of classical fiction (kososŏl) in the Korean vernacular. However, not all of these stories originally had been composed in the Korean vernacular or even in Korea. Instead, such classical fiction also encompassed vernacular translations and adaptations of classical Chinese and Sino-Korean stories. It also seems likely that publishers drew on late-Chosŏn Korean vernacular translations/adaptations of pre-modern Chinese vernacular fiction, though this question has not yet been adequately studied. Thus, despite the absence of information about print runs, sales, and business decisions, it is obvious that publishers were largely capitalising on converting available manuscripts in Korean into printed editions.

Second, in the 1910s, Korean translations and adaptations of Japanese fiction were seriously threatening the economic viability of “modern [Korean] fiction” (sinhosŏl). Paradoxically, the increasing mass availability of a range of classical fiction in Korean helped to stimulate a renewed interest in modern Korean fiction. In this respect,
“classical” and “modern” were complementary rather than antithetical, with the “modern” riding on the coattails of the “classical” (Kwŏn 1990, 182).

Finally, the modern printing press also encouraged a renewed interest in Korea’s elite intellectual and literary heritage, that is, in the literature and classics as written in classical Chinese (Han’haek). Not surprisingly, however, commercial publishers ultimately focussed on profits, and in the marketplace, Korea’s classical intellectual heritage could not compete against vernacular fiction (Kwŏn 1990, 181-182).

Though classical fiction continued to be a mainstay for publishers over the following decades, publisher-catalogues attest to a readership with increasingly diverse choices. As McHale notes of the case of colonial Vietnam, “[w]hen one examines what Vietnamese published and read between 1920 and 1945, it becomes clear that Vietnamese thought about far more than revolution and the nation” (McHale 2004, 7). Precisely the same can be said of Korea.

In retrospect, it is clear that Kwŏn and Han undertook their publishing activities at a particularly competitive time. Market forces thus help partly to explain their failure. Indeed, 1912, the year in which Kwŏn launched the Korean Buddhist Monthly, marked the start of a remarkable period that lasted through 1918, the year in which Han’s Mind Only was launched and failed. During those six years, a vast number of classical stories were published in the Korean vernacular, so that it is possible to characterize this period as “the golden age of classical fiction” (Kwŏn 1990, 182, 204 and 210).

But neither Kwŏn’s conservative vision for a renewed Korean Buddhism, nor Han’s radical, youth-oriented vision for a thoroughly modernised Korean Buddhism, attracted sufficient readers. Notwithstanding the importance of competition for readers, market forces and politics, it is reasonable to conclude that the greatest problem facing Buddhist publishing at the outset was to be found in Korean Buddhism itself. There simply was a lack of readers willing to pay for journals dealing primarily with Buddhist topics, regardless of the journal’s political slant. It is therefore not surprising to find a sense of a shared mission—and just as likely, desperation—among the leading Buddhist figures of the early colonial period. This can be gleaned from the fact that the contributors to Han’s Mind Only comprised a virtual “who’s who” of notable Buddhist intellectuals, including Kwŏn himself as well as Pak Hanyŏng (1870-1948), Paek Yongsŏng (1864-1940), Yi Nŭnhwa (1869-1943) and others (Kim and Yi 1996, 45-46).

However, reform-minded Korean Buddhist leaders and intellectuals were also faced with the problem of history. By this I mean not just the historical forces that had led to the weakening of Korean Buddhism during the Chosŏn dynasty (1392-1910)—and to which they were attempting to respond—but also the question of how they, as clerics (or in Yi’s case, as a lay adherent), could or should envision Buddhism’s role in Korean life. This question was fundamentally political in at least two respects. First, it required consideration of the relationship between institutional Buddhism and the laity, and second, that of institutional Buddhism and the state. There was at least some shared interest in the first question, notwithstanding differing points of emphasis among the various figures. The second proved more problematic, however, and it is ultimately unpersuasive to see this as a consequence of Japanese colonialism.

Instead, the relationship between institutional Buddhism and the state had been an issue throughout Korean history. Japanese colonialism merely underscored the importance of the question, and Han was conspicuous for his sustained interest in the relationship between institutional Buddhism and the state as well as the consequences of that
relationship for the health of Buddhism as a whole. At the end of his career, he would write a novel (lowbrow) that traced the role of Buddhism in a woman’s life. The significance of that novel is addressed later. It is first necessary, however, to assess the role of Buddhism in Korean life and history as depicted in the 1919 “Declaration of Korean Buddhist Priests.”


As Park has noted, there was no clear correlation between “modernization” and “nationalism” in the minds of Korean Buddhist reformers in the early twentieth century. Moreover, what constituted “modern” in the minds of reformers was neither self-evident nor unitary. Park comes as close as possible to offering a workable definition when noting that the “utmost interest of Korean Buddhists was to present a socially viable form of Buddhism” and that this presentation drew heavily on the methods used by Christians, methods that, as employed by some Korean Buddhists, aimed at creating “a sense of connection among the [Sangha], the laity, and society” (Park 1998, 21-22). The question is, what role did Buddhist clerics imagine Buddhism playing in the lives of Koreans?

This question can be approached through the “Declaration of Korean Buddhist Priests” which was signed by twelve Korean Buddhist clerics. The document was discovered in Paris in 1960 and has a sketchy history. It seems to have been intended originally for distribution at the Paris Peace Conference (May 1919) and was then published in November 1919 in conjunction with the Korean Provisional Government in Shanghai. (The Provisional Government had formed in April of that year, and a Korean Buddhist had been dispatched as a representative to it.) Apart from the historical confusion surrounding the document, there is also the matter of linguistic confusion. Korean, Chinese, and English versions of the document apparently were printed (Kim 1992, 82). In addition, there is an available Japanese-language version which I have used for the following overview (reprinted in Kim 1992, 82-83n55).

The first section of the document notes the Buddhist teachings of equality and compassion, before proceeding to a critique of Japanese militarism, expansionism, and aggression towards its neighbours. Such actions clearly contradict Buddhism (thereby demonstrating the hypocrisy of Japan’s external expressions of honouring Buddhism), and the document emphasises the desire for independence and how that desire was manifested in the March First Movement. The section concludes by noting that its signatories cannot remain silent bystanders in view of the fact that Japan’s crimes have reached a highpoint by butchering tens of thousands of innocent men and women in suppressing what was a peaceful movement.

The following section names Han Yongun and Paek Yongsŏng, the two Buddhist priests among the thirty three people who signed Korea’s 1919 Declaration of Independence, and then notes that there were many other Korean Buddhist clerics who in the immediate aftermath of the declaration participated in the unfolding independence movement, offering up their lives and assets. It then addresses the means by which the Japanese can exercise control (e.g., through police officers [Jap., keikan] and the army [Jap., guntai]) and draws a clear link between the evils of such measures and the suffering of the twenty million Korean people. It concludes by emphasising that armed revolt in the face of injustice and suffering is the tradition of Korea’s forefathers.

The third and longest section of the document provides the historical context, and its main focus is on the role of Buddhism in Korean history. The author’s note
Buddhism’s long history in Korea, allude to its loss of prestige and suppression by the government during the Chosŏn dynasty (1392-1910), and recall Korea’s compassionate role in transmitting Buddhism to Japan centuries earlier—something that clearly contrasts with Japan’s lack of compassion for the Korean people. It is then that the Japanese invasions of Korea (1592-1598) under the leadership of Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1536-1598) are invoked, and the author/s emphasise that Korean Buddhist priests, both high and low in rank, sacrificed their lives to protect their country. The author/s attribute this to the deep and long-lasting relationship between the state/nation and Buddhism in Korea (Jap., kokka to Bukkyō to no innen) and go on to discuss the Japanese colonial regime’s complete disregard for Korea’s history and its people’s traditions and culture. The section concludes by emphasising that colonial policies seek to destroy the Korean people and that due to Japan’s evil measures, Korean Buddhism has lost the freedom it had enjoyed for two thousand years under “the protection of the Korean nation” (Jap., Kankoku kokka no hogo). According to the document, Korean Buddhism is about to be driven to extinction.

The final, short section starts by expressing a commitment to working with the Korean people for the attainment of freedom and independence. It emphasises that Korean Buddhism is well suited to that task and vows that “in order to be saved from Japan-isation and destruction, we seven thousand priests and nuns will join together, rise up, and repay the country though we might die.” Here the Buddhist religious element is especially pronounced. Hotsugan (Jap., prayer, petition, vow, etc.) recalls Amida Buddha’s original vow to save all sentient beings (Jap., hongan), which in turn recalls the Buddhist teachings of equality (Jap., byōdō) and compassion or mercy (Jap., jihi), both of which are named at the outset of the document as Buddhism’s two guiding principles.

As suggested through the synopsis, this document argues that Korean Buddhists have a role to play in Korea’s struggle for independence. This role is couched in Buddhist soteriological terms (i.e., the compassion and mercy of Amida) as well as in historical terms (i.e., Buddhists’ participation in fighting the Japanese during Hideyoshi’s invasions). Moreover, the mention of Han Yongun, Paek Yongsŏng, and the contributions of other Buddhists to the independence movement in the aftermath of March First suggests that the actions of Korean Buddhists exemplify Buddhist soteriological teachings on a practical political level. Such actions are, according to the text, nothing less than a continuation of Korean Buddhism’s historic role in protecting the country/state/nation which is itself presented as synonymous with the Korean people as a people, that is, as a race with its own culture, traditions, and history.

In light of these claims, the defensive tone of the third section is striking. It is true that the “laws and ordinances” (Jap., hōrei; Kor., sach’allyŏng, or “temple ordinances”) enacted by the Japanese in 1911 seem to have confounded the Korean Buddhist institution as a whole and served to align Korean Buddhism with Japanese colonial interests. But that set of laws in and of itself does not suffice to explain the relative ease with which that process occurred, and read against the Japanese colonial context and the unfolding of the March First Movement itself, this document demonstrates—both in terms of content and as an artefact—the weakness of patriotic or nationalist sentiment in the Korean Buddhist institution as a whole.

First, the fact that two of the thirty three signatories to the Declaration of Independence were Buddhists is less cause for pride than shame. One might reasonably expect better from a religion with so long a history and with such a deep connection to the nation and the people. Second, the document was discovered in Paris in 1960. To my knowledge, no copy of it or anything like it was widely disseminated in Korea itself, and
“seven thousand priests and nuns” did not rise up together to battle the Japanese. Third, since it appears that the document was composed after the events of March First for promulgation at the Paris Peace Conference (which it seemed would recognize Korean independence), the Korean Buddhist institution as represented by the document looks much like a Johnny-Come-Lately to the cause of national independence. This would seem to account for the defensive tone in the third section of the document. Moreover, in light of the dates surrounding the document, it might be read as a cynical, self-serving attempt to find a place for Korean Buddhism in a new political climate, that is, in an independent Korea. Prior to the Paris Peace Conference the recognition of Korean independence seemed possible, and so one can see reasonableness in its approach: an exculpation of recent lapses owing to the Japanese presented against claims on behalf of Buddhism’s patriotic/nationalist credentials.

Only two of the signatories of the “Declaration” can be positively identified, but their identities are sufficient to suggest further the complex circumstances in which the document was produced. O Sŏngwŏl (dates unknown) had in 1910 worked with Han Yongun and Pak Hanyŏng to stop a merger of Japanese and Korean Buddhism proposed by Yi Hoegwang (1862-1933), then the head of Korean Buddhism’s representative body that had been organized in 1908 (Yi 1993, 145-146). The events of 1910 centred on religious questions, however, and need not necessarily be seen in a nationalist, patriotic, or anti-Japanese light. In contrast, the only other identifiable signatory, Kim Kuha (Ch’ŏnbo, 1872-1965), in fact, had taken a position in 1908 in the organization headed by Yi Hoegwang (cf. Kim 1992, 84). Apart from signing this document, he also made donations to the independence movement after March First. However, in 1925, he resigned from his abbotship at T’ongdo Temple after priests there accused him of embezzling temple funds to make those donations (Yun 1994, vol. 2, 171; Yi 1993, 298-299).

In retrospect, the 1919 “Declaration” is conspicuous for its engagement with ideas that were highlighted by the March First Movement, specifically the people as an ethnic/racial group (Jap., minzoku) and the nation-state (Jap., kokka). Such an emphasis would have been understandable for anyone committed to safeguarding the future of the Korean Buddhist institution when there was hope of Korea gaining its independence. But the document seems to have “disappeared” once the possibility of independence was dashed. In sum, it is clear that the document’s aim was the protection of the Korean Buddhist institution rather than Korean Buddhism or anything else.

The document is therefore equally conspicuous for its platitudes and empty rhetoric. In particular, it is remarkable how little its authors had to work with in depicting the relationship between the Korean Buddhist institution and the lives of ordinary Koreans. Instead, the focus is not on the people, but rather the relationship between the institution and the state. It is thus not surprising that the Korean Buddhist institution as a whole followed a predictable path in acquiescing to the demands of the secular state during the colonial period, and the fact that the secular state was foreign further underscores the degree to which institutional Buddhism was state oriented. This too explains the apparent apathy of many Korean Buddhist clergy towards political questions as well as many of the overt collaborative activities in which Korean Buddhists became implicated: the Japanese state granted Korean Buddhists a degree of prestige, and given the opportunity, they supported it.

Of all the important Buddhist figures during the colonial era, Han Yongun is therefore most conspicuous for two reasons. First, his advocacy for the reform of Korean Buddhism was organised around his conviction that Korean Buddhism must re-
conceptualise itself and break its historical connection to the state. Second, he emphasized the responsibility of the individual, and among Korean Buddhists of his era, he seems to have been the first to have done so. He was also consistent on these points.

In the years after his failure with Treatise, he turned his attention to younger clerics who must have seemed to him to hold greater promise for change. In “On the Buddhist Youth Alliance” (Pulgyo ch’ôngnyôn tongmaengê taehayô), a lengthy essay published in 1931 in the journal Buddhism (Pulgyo), for instance, he returned to topics similar to those that he had addressed in Treatise some two decades earlier as well as in the early 1920s when, fresh out of jail, he published articles criticizing the colonial government’s regulations concerning Buddhist temples. A core element among these and other writings was his repeated insistence that his readers take responsibility and exercise what control they had, precisely the idea that had defined his Treatise. It is therefore significant that his last major literary work, A Terrible Fate, imagined the role of Buddhism in the life of an impoverished woman, and in so doing, sat in contrast to the rationalistic views he had long espoused.

4. IMAGINING BUDDHISM THROUGH FICTION:  
HAN YONGUN’S A TERRIBLE FATE (PANGMYONG; 1939)

An unpublished essay by Han, “Some Remarks on the Literary Arts” (Munye soôn), offers insight into the difficulty he had contextualising himself as a writer (Han 1980, vol. 2, 192-196). This difficulty arose from the tension between traditional, elite Korean views of literature, which were rooted in Confucianism, and Western notions of literature, which were largely imported through Japan. Literature was, of course, just one area in which tradition and modernity collided in Korea from the late nineteenth through the early twentieth centuries. But due to the influence of Confucianism in Korean intellectual history, changes in the conception of literature were of no small significance. Three were most important.

First, writing became a profession. Second, the definition of literature expanded. In addition to poetry, sanctioned by the Confucian tradition, fiction—novels and short stories—and plays became classifiable as literature. Third, the professionalization of writing and expansion of the definition of literature occurred in tandem with the development of literary criticism and literary-historical scholarship. As a consequence, literature, in the broadest possible sense, became increasingly complicated. While some modern professional authors might have seen themselves as artists, mass publication put the written word in the hands of an increasing readership with its own tastes. As discussed above, traditional Korean fiction was a publishing mainstay throughout the colonial period, while modern literature—Korean or translations of foreign literature—typically encountered more chaotic circumstances in terms of publication and attracting readership (see also Kim 2008; Kwôn 2008).

Han’s essay suggests that he found himself stuck between the old and the new. On the one hand, he was not resistant to the expanded, modern view of literary genres. On the other, he was something of a traditionalist in that he saw literature in functional terms, that is, in much the same way as in the Confucian literary tradition. What was different, however, was the literary and intellectual context. For Han, the demands of popularity—which he himself was happy to meet—paradoxically meant didacticism (cf. Yu 1992, 72). He was, in sum, no modern literary aesthete, considering himself an artist above the mass of readers. His activities as a publisher had taught him the importance of meeting readers’ expectations, at least in terms of how a story was told.
A Terrible Fate, which was his last major literary effort, was in many respects among the most important things he wrote. It embodied his belief that popular literature (read: lowbrow) was nothing to be ashamed of. But it also embodied his approach to Buddhist propagation through mass print media. Serialised in Chosŏn Ilbo from May 1938 through September 1939, A Terrible Fate was, unlike most of his other novels, set in early twentieth-century Korea (Han 1980, vol. 5, 6-290). It was, in short, Buddhist propagation through a novel, delivered in a newspaper for the widest possible readership.

Its female protagonist, Sunyŏng, lives in the countryside, not far from Paekdam Temple (where Han, in fact, had spent his early career as a monk). When we first meet her, she is fourteen years old, hungry, overworked in the farm fields, and by turns too hot and too cold. In addition to her physical discomfort, she is also sad and lonely due to her personal family circumstances. Her mother died; her father remarried; and then he died. She has no brothers or sisters and is under the care of her stepmother. One day she happens to meet a middle-aged woman by the name of Ms. Song who will, together with a younger lady named Unok, conspire to convince Sunyŏng to leave home and go to Seoul. Unok skilfully exploits Sunyŏng’s sense of physical and emotional impoverishment. What follows traces Sunyŏng’s life through further and further degradation, first at the hands of Ms. Song and Unok, who manipulate her into working as a bar-hostess, and later, at the hands of a man whom she loves and marries and who ultimately betrays her. Much of the story makes for grim reading, because, apart from Sunyŏng’s suffering, it also deals with addiction to various drugs (from the smoked to the injected) and prostitution. Early in the story, however, a Buddhist element is put in place when Sunyŏng’s life is saved by a Buddhist nun. At the end of the story, the Buddhist element is highlighted when Sunyŏng decides to seek out the nun who had saved her life, and discovering that the nun had died, Sunyŏng makes the decision to become a Buddhist nun herself.

In many respects, A Terrible Fate thus corresponds closely to the classical fiction that enjoyed popularity throughout the colonial period, even though it was set in contemporary Korea. As noted above, Han saw nothing wrong with writing for popular tastes, and the story’s sharp—albeit implicit—didacticism put it squarely in the lowbrow category. However, what is most remarkable about the use of Buddhism in the story is how Han is forced to accommodate not only popular literary tastes, but also popular religious sensibilities. Though Sunyŏng suffers, she is ultimately saved through her conversion to Buddhism. Indeed, her discovery of the true motives of the people who had harmed her leads to her discovery of religious truth. On the other hand, those who had intentionally hurt her ultimately suffer. They are, if effect, punished.

The way in which Han envisioned Buddhism in A Terrible Fate differed markedly from the rationalistic, superstition-condemning views that had characterised his Treatise decades earlier. It also marked a sharp departure from the family-oriented views that had characterised his Treatise and had so closely resembled those of Japanese Buddhist reformers (Jaffe 2001, 165-241). Indeed, in A Terrible Fate, family is the locus of problems. As Walraven has recently noted, the “modernistic discourse” found in Han was also characterised by “Confucian prejudices” (Walraven 2007, 20). It is, therefore, not surprising to find both tension and accord between such modernising impulses and Confucian prejudices in Han’s “Remarks.” Indeed, A Terrible Fate encapsulates Han’s views on literature (nothing wrong with aiming for popularity), his roles as a publisher and writer (aim for the largest possible audience), and his career as a Buddhist (propagate Buddhism at the grassroots level). Yet the story he told veered uncomfortably close to a form of Buddhist superstition that he himself had condemned from early in his career. In
effect, *A Terrible Fate* marked the culmination and undoing of a career of writing to propagate a modern form of Korean Buddhism through mass print in the vernacular.

## 5. Conclusion

As Buswell has noted, the “religious lassitude” of Chosŏn-dynasty Buddhism was exacerbated by “the inability of Buddhists to spread their message beyond the confines of the monastery” (Buswell 1997, 119). However, this was no longer true by the early twentieth century. Modern print enabled Buddhists to spread their message, but that capability raised the question: what was that message? Indeed, modern print created (or at least, highlighted) a predicament that still exists: Buddhist monks must balance the teachings of their religion with the needs of the laity (cf. Buswell 1997, 118-120).

In the case of the Buddhist reform movement in Korea during the colonial period, it is thus possible to see the use of modern mass print as part of a more fundamental tension between literate and oral cultures. Indeed, McHale’s summary of the Buddhist reform movement in Vietnam sounds uncannily familiar: “a movement by literate, text-oriented monks to develop a print culture that would eradicate the practices of oral culture” (McHale 2004, 160). Yet for all Han’s criticisms of the Buddhism of such an oral culture and all his activities on behalf of a modern print culture to support a modern Buddhism, in *A Terrible Fate*, he too found it difficult to imagine a modern Buddhism that would appeal to readers or indeed, even suffice to save his protagonist.

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