

## New Woman Reborn as a Buddhist Nun: Kim Ir-yöp's Buddhist Stories in the Age of *Yönae*

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### Introduction

In March 1933, *Samch'ölli* 三千里 magazine presented an interesting caricature which is reproduced here as figure 1. In the caricature, a woman in glasses is standing on a large lotus leaf. She is wearing a Buddhist robe and is pressing her palms together. Above her head, a big dragon is flying. At the pond's edge, a man in a Western suit, a necktie, and a felt hat is crying for her. The woman is Kim Ir-yöp 金一葉 (1896-1971),<sup>1</sup> whose love stories, seven lovers and two divorces, became a hot item of gossip in colonial Korea. She was later to become a Buddhist nun. She was one of the pioneering New Women in the early 1920s. In the newly opened "age of *yönae* [戀愛]," as Kwön Podūrae calls it,<sup>2</sup> in which love became a metonym for modernity, she advocated free love and sexual equality among men and women, flatly challenging the "traditional" value of female chastity. Her entering the Buddhist sangha impressed both her contemporaries and today's scholars as the predestined tragic ending of a radical New Woman. Making the assumption that she had stopped her literary and social careers with her tonsure, few scholars paid attention to her later writings and activities.<sup>3</sup>

In this paper I will argue that Kim Ir-yöp's involvement in Buddhism needs to be reconsidered as an extension and revision of her pursuit of love, rather than as a retreat from it or a tragic ending. She herself complained bitterly about such social prejudice, insisting that she had become a Buddhist nun in order to be able to love in the true sense of the word, to be the owner of love not its slave, and to solve the problems of love by learning the essence of love.<sup>4</sup> The increased number of publications inspired by her Buddhist beliefs strongly disproves the assumption that she had withdrawn from her career. Most of all, as Jin Y. Park's critical insight suggests, her on-going concerns about love in her Buddhist writings should be discussed within the broad context of modernization with which Korean Buddhism struggled.<sup>5</sup>

Through a critical reading of Kim Ir-yöp's Buddhist short stories, this paper will examine how Kim Ir-yöp made a connection between Buddhism and modernity as epitomized by love and portrayed how Korean Buddhism finds a way through the maze of colonial induced modernization. I will first draw a brief sketch of the climate of 1920s and 1930s Korea, a time in which love and eroticism pervaded

the air, and Kim's role as a revolutionary New Woman. Then, I will take a close look at her two short stories; "P'arangsacro hwahan tu ch'ōngch'un" 과랑새로 化한 두 靑春 ["Two lovers and bluebirds", 1929] and "Aeyogūl p'ihayō" 愛慾을 避하여 ["Escape from passion", 1932]. Love as the sign of modernity consciously or unconsciously penetrated Korean Buddhism. These short stories portray the untold history of the experience of Korean Buddhism in the modern age and give a rare and valuable clue as to how a Buddhist woman tries to identify a new relationship between Buddhism and love.

### A Sketch of "New Women", Love and 1920s Korea

As Western societies discovered a new model of gender roles and modern expressions of sexuality in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, by breaking the early Christian framework "that had cast sexuality in marriage in moral terms as God-given, sacred, and natural, and specific acts outside marital relations as sinful,"<sup>6</sup> the collapse of the Confucian state which had exercised its controlling power over gender brought about great sexual and sociopolitical changes in Korea. Confucianism was denounced for hindering modernization and causing the downfall and colonization of the country (1910). Confucian customs for women, such as early and arranged marriage, concubinage, and bans on women's school-education and re-marriage, were placed under heavy and concentrated attack, initially by male nationalists for the purpose of strengthening the nation. Soon afterwards a new group of women, most tellingly influenced by the international (Western) and transnational (Japanese) trend towards the New Women phenomena, appeared as a cultural symbol and opened up a new "age of free love" in 1920s colonial Korea.

As Kim Kyōng-il and Pak Yong-ok clearly indicate, the terms of *sin yōsōng* 新女性 (New Women) and *yōnae* 戀愛 (love or free love) were both newly coined and translated Western imports that reached colonial Korea directly or indirectly through Japan.<sup>7</sup> New women such as Kim Ir-yōp and Na Hye-sōk 羅蕙錫 (1896-1946) were pioneers in the process that turned this mere term *yōnae* into the very symbol of modernity in Korea. They were a small number of Korean women who had the benefit of a female education at modern (in particular, Christian) schools and colleges. Their extraordinary background as female college students in Tokyo, their appearance with short skirts and bobbed hair and their liberal and revolutionary thinking in terms of love, marriage, and divorce attracted great attention from the Korean public. All their experiences – from free love, marriage, love affairs, the overthrow of female chastity, the failure of love, divorce, re-marriage, and insanity to love-induced suicide – filled the newspapers of the 1920s and 1930s and became the subject of hot gossip in public.<sup>8</sup>

Double suicides, for instance, were one of the most eye-catching and infectious activities, which stemmed from the love fever of the 1920s. New Woman Yun Sim-dōk and a promising dramatist Kim U-jin took their own lives because of the frustration caused by their futureless love, an incident that caused a great stir in

colonial Korea. As recorded in the sensational musical item by Yun Sim-dŏk, “Sa-ŭi ch’anmi” 死의 讚美 [“Eulogy of death”], this sad love story between a popular soprano and a married man inspired a passion for suicide, in particular, for joint suicide. As Yi Ŭn-gyŏng carefully observes, the factors linked to such suicides were a collision with Confucian tradition, the sense of depression prevalent in colonial Korea, and the copying of the Japanese tradition of love suicide.<sup>9</sup> Ironically, modern constructions, such as iron bridges and the footbridge on the Han River, were, simultaneously, the favorite places for dating and for suicide.<sup>10</sup>

*Yŏnae* was constituted as a representative of “colonial” modernity and it is important to note that this account of colonialism is the crucial factor in ensuring the difference between the free love phenomena in colonial Korea and in Japan. Its chief consumers, mogŏl (modern girl) and mobo (modern boy) dated in newly created spaces such as cafés, bars, dance halls, theaters, and restaurants in the Namch’ŏn district of Seoul, an area in which Japanese settlers resided. They drank “Western” liquors and beverages while listening to jazz music.<sup>11</sup> As satirically illustrated in the cartoon “Summer 1930” (see figure 2),<sup>12</sup> *mogŏls* and *mobos* drink a glass of ice coffee through two straws and exclaim in the language of colonial modernity “Atashi, aisŭk’ohika taisŭki taisŭkiyo” 私,アイスコーヒーか大好き,大好きよ.... (I love ice coffee). Ch’an kyŏngwŏn and Namsan parks were the preeminent dating locations. These parks were a product of “colonial modernity.” In 1907, the Korean King, Kojong 高宗, was dethroned by the Japanese authorities. His Ch’anggyŏng Palace (*Ch’anggyŏng-gung* 昌慶宮) was transformed into a public zoo, where sakura (cherry blossom), was in full bloom in the spring. Namsan Park, built in 1910, was the neighbor of the Chosŏn jingu shrine (Kor. *Chosŏn singung* 朝鮮神宮).<sup>13</sup>

The enthusiasm for *yŏnae* was linked to the passion for reading romances. The romances of the Japanese writer Kikuchi Kan (菊池寛) were widely read by Korean students.<sup>14</sup> Yi Kwang-su 李光洙 (1892-1950)’s masterpiece *Mujŏng* 無情 [*Heartless*, 1917], an invocation to free love, received great support from young people and harsh condemnation from older generations, achieving the status of a book that every student must read. The classic *Ch’unhyangjŏn* 춘향전, the story of a daughter of a *kisaeng* and a son of *yangban*, was one of the most popular books in the marketplace.<sup>15</sup> Ch’ŏn Chŏng-hwan even argues that modern Korean literature developed from the writing of love letters.<sup>16</sup> No Cha-yŏng’s *Sarangŭi pulkkot* 사랑의 불꽃 [*A flame of love*, 1923], for instance, was a collection of love letters and sold briskly during this period.

Love, marriage, divorce, and family were core components of the age of *yŏnae* and accordingly, central features of debates in colonial society. New Women, conservatives, nationalists, socialists, missionaries and the authorities fiercely discussed those matters.<sup>17</sup> Despite the different arguments, the traditional value of *hyŏnmo yangch’ŏ* 賢母良妻 (wise mother and good wife) was re-invented and reigned over womanhood at the time, just as had happened in metropolitan Japan. Female education is a good example of this trend. Women’s education did not

aim to emancipate women or to promote self-awakening. On the contrary, parents sent their daughters to schools in order to marry them off to highly-educated men. Girls' schools mainly taught home economics: sewing, needlework, cooking, child-rearing, and hygienic cleaning rather than topics like women's liberation and right. Female students were encouraged to stay at home after graduation, as "prudent and wise housewives" rather than to take up professions. Their main task was to support their husbands and sons who were working for the national liberation struggle.<sup>18</sup>

The colonial government neglected women's education until they felt a need for female workers and military motherhood in the preparations for war. From the 1930s, the state paid attention to women's education and labor. The colonial government used propaganda about imperial motherhood in order to encourage mothers to raise "Emperor's sons," to proudly send them to the imperial army, to conserve basic necessities and electricity, and donate war supplies to the empire.<sup>19</sup> As Theodore Jun Yoo makes clear, demographic increases had been seen as a prerequisite of the expansion of the empire since 1930. Therefore, the colonial authorities stressed the mother's role in reproduction as an important duty in the service of the state, even though most Korean families (impoverished farmers) could not afford to keep their existing family members.<sup>20</sup>

The New Woman Kim Ir-yŏp who as an editor led *Sinyŏja* 新女子, the "first journal published by Korean women in Korea with a distinctive feminist orientation,"<sup>21</sup> in 1920 challenged the prevailing ideal of the wise mother and good wife which was constructed by colonialism and anti-colonial nationalism. In a discussion meeting organized by *Sin Tong-A* 新東亞 journal in April 1932, she unyieldingly attacked the notion of a woman's duties in relation to housekeeping and child-rearing.

"It is unreasonable that we should stay at home because we are women. It is unavoidable that women give birth to children. But we can leave our children to professionals. Women need social activities. Our home is too small and limited. The position of women will never be better if we waste our time with domestic labor."<sup>22</sup>

As seen in the quotation, Kim Ir-yŏp calls for an "unwise mother and bad wife" who gets out of the home and does not confine her activities to housekeeping. Moreover, she claims that the mother should liberate herself from the duty of rearing children. These arguments were directly opposed to those of the nationalists and the state power, which stood on the "same" side in terms of womanhood. Moreover, she practiced what she preached. After giving birth to a transnational baby in 1922, she left his upbringing to his Japanese father and relinquished her motherhood role.<sup>23</sup> Her behavior distinguished her from other New Women such as Na Hye-sŏk and Hŏ Yŏng-suk (Yi Kwang-su's wife), who still tried to successfully manage both their professional and domestic lives, to be supportive to their husbands (a diplomat of the Japanese colonial government in Korea and a Korean national leader respectively), and to take responsibility for child-rearing and education.<sup>24</sup>

Kim Ir-yöp's essay on female chastity in 1927<sup>25</sup> presents her most revolutionary and radical view on female sexuality.

“According to old customs, chastity is a material thing... If a woman has a sexual relationship with a man, her chastity is assumed to be contaminated and ruined... but chastity is in no way such a solid body. There is love and there is chastity. If love disappears, the obligation of fidelity disappears, too.”<sup>26</sup>

At that time, conservatives still viewed *yönae* (free love) as nothing more than lust and an irresponsible act.<sup>27</sup> Nationalists, socialists and a new generation of New Women in the 1930s sometimes supported free love but often conceived of it as sexual indulgence, bourgeois taste, an imitation of Western sentiments, and a selfish act, especially indifferent to national, colonial, political, and class-related matters. Pioneering New Women, such as Kim Ir-yöp and Na Hye-sök, who favored free love, had little interest in class issues and political (national, colonial and international) events. This tendency is assessed as being an example of their crucial limitations and shortcomings. However, it is noteworthy that New Women, who conversely emphasized the women's contribution to the Korean nation, later became pro-Japanese collaborators, claiming the female contribution in relation to the glory of the Japanese empire.

Moreover, recent scholarship demonstrates how New Woman and gender issues are intimately linked, not only to feminism but to nation building, a nation's modernizing process, and colonialism.<sup>28</sup> But as Kwön In-suk points out,<sup>29</sup> women's chastity was the very pillar of Confucian tradition and, in that sense, Kim Ir-yöp's argument was a direct attack on traditional patriarchy. It could be seen as an attack on another patriarchy, that of the nation. Anti-colonial nationalism showed hostility to the women's act of overthrowing chastity and idealized the virtuous and self-sacrificing women. As Sheila Miyoshi Jager describes, Korean male nationalists, such as Yi Kwang-su, on the one hand supported free love by liberating women's bodies from traditional customs, but on the other hand, entangled liberated women with a nation-building project, stressing the need for a new commitment to the imagined community of the nation.<sup>30</sup>

New women who made iconoclastic attacks on female chastity and the myth of motherhood were subjected to enormous pressure in colonial society. This was especially true in the changing climate of the 1930s. In the confrontation with the Western powers, Western culture and modernity were re-defined as evil, whereas Asian culture was rehabilitated as valuable. Love as the sign of modernity was accordingly stigmatized as a symbol of degeneration, egocentrism, and self-indulgence.<sup>31</sup> Na Hye-sök, who claimed that chastity was neither ethic nor law but a choice, and who complained that children disturbed her artistic career,<sup>32</sup> was cruelly divorced by her husband and suffered a nervous breakdown. Kim Myöng-sun, who criticized affectionless marriage as prostitution, was sexually abused and became insane.

Kim Ir-yŏp found a way out in the form of Buddhism, an alternative to the path of insanity and suicide to which most pioneering New Women were driven. Her conversion to Buddhism, however, has been seen as nothing more than a similar tragic ending. Her contemporaries and today's scholars have assumed that she was heartbroken, sought an escape in Buddhism through turning her back on society, and forgetting secular matters.<sup>33</sup> Such assertions are seen to be groundless once we focus on her personal experience. Her *yŏnae* experience did not end with Buddhism. She converted to Buddhism after falling in love with a Buddhist man and later married a monk (*chaegasŭng* 在家僧). As one of a small number of female Buddhists, she participated in publishing the *Pulgyo* (佛敎) magazine and strove to modernize and propagate Buddhism from about 1930 onwards. Her Buddhist stories, which we will consider below, demonstrate that the new woman, Kim Ir-yŏp, did not disappear in a vague cloud of Buddhism but was reborn as an Amazon, someone able to face and solve the problem of modernity in relation to Buddhism.

### “Two Lovers and Bluebirds” (1929): Old Buddhist Legends Revised

“Modernization” was, as Pak P'o-ri states, the imperative goal of the Korean Buddhist sangha during the colonial period.<sup>34</sup> Seriously weakened Korean Buddhism needed revitalization and reformation in order to survive as a religion when confronted by the Christian missionaries and Japanese Buddhists as they accelerated their proselytization campaigns. A series of Buddhist attempts to respond to the challenge, such as the production of reformation treatises, the establishment of Buddhist schools and an improvement in the education of monks, Buddhist participation in the March First Movement, Buddhist youth movements aimed at the abolition of the Temple Ordinance, Buddhist journalism<sup>35</sup> and the unification of all temples, have all become major study topics in relation to modern Korean Buddhism.<sup>36</sup>

However, as with all discussions about modernity in relation to colonial Korea, the characterizing indicator of love should be included in any discussion on Korean Buddhism's journey towards modernization. It is, however, only lately that Buddhologists have, one by one, begun to notice the theme of love in modern Buddhist poetry and discourse. A careful reading of Han Yong-un's *Your Silence* (*Nim-ŭi ch'immuk* 님의 沈默, 1926), Gregory N. Evon, for instance, reveals numerous erotic images and raises the question of Buddhism and eroticism.<sup>37</sup> He concludes that Han Yong-un affirmed desire or passion and that such affirmation of desire was the reaction of nonconformist Buddhists vis-à-vis the reformation and modernization of Buddhism.

Kim Ir-yŏp, who had been an enthusiastic adherent of free love and became a Buddhist (first as a laywomen and later as a nun), is definitely an important subject for study with regard to the Buddhist response to love as an indicator of modernity. Jin Y. Park is the first scholar to pay attention to this point.<sup>38</sup> Underscoring the historical meaning of love in colonial Korea, she finds a connotation of the self deeply rooted in both love and Buddhism and clarifies that Kim Ir-yŏp's Buddhist

philosophy addressed the shortcomings of modernity. Following this new insight, I will discuss Buddhism and modernity in the guise of love, focusing on Kim Ir-yŏp's short story "Two lovers and bluebirds" (1929).<sup>39</sup> The original text of the story is depicted in figure 3.

The main storyline of this work is as follows: A young mendicant comes to a house. In this house, a maiden lives alone, waiting for her father. Her father has gone to town and has still not come back home. It is already late and dark. The monk lodges at her house, spends the night with her and leaves the next morning. Her father comes back with good news about her marriage. However, the daughter is indifferent to her marriage. She only thinks of the monk and chants what she has learned in the arms of the monk. Spring comes. The mendicant comes back as promised. When he recites a magic spell, the two young people are transformed into bluebirds and fly away. After they have disappeared, two pairs of shoes are left behind.

This work deals with love between a monk and a woman. Such a love story first reminds us of the eccentric behavior of the Silla monk Wŏnhyo 元曉 (617-686)<sup>40</sup> and of the Sŏn 禪 (Jp. Zen) Master Kyŏnghŏ 鏡虛 (1849-1912)<sup>41</sup> in modern times. However, as a matter of fact, love stories in Buddhism have been orally transmitted in the form of Buddhist legends or folktales for a long time. Kim Ir-yŏp's life time was a period when spoken legends or tales were re-discovered, re-introduced and recorded. As an example, her colleagues in *Pulgyo* magazine released a special edition of Buddhist tales on snakes, at the beginning of the snake year of 1929.<sup>42</sup> In such a climate, Kim Ir-yŏp also seems to have taken great interest in Buddhist legends or tales, especially related to love, re-introducing and even remaking them into her own works of fiction. Her short story "Yŏngji" 影池 ["The shady pond"],<sup>43</sup> for instance, is based upon the sad love story of a mason, Asadal, and his wife Asanyŏ, which is associated with the Sŏkka Pagoda in Pulguk Temple (*Pulguksa* 佛國寺). At the beginning of this short story, the storyteller, Kim Ir-yŏp, also alludes to the resemblance of her story to existing folktales or legends by saying, "This story might be an old tale or a legend. I might have heard it in childhood, otherwise dreamt it."<sup>44</sup> As to which Buddhist legends or folktales "Two lovers and bluebirds" is related, my belief is that two Buddhist tales can be considered: one is about a lovesick monk and the other is about the personification of Kwanseŭm bodhisattva (*Kwanseŭm posal* 觀世音菩薩).<sup>45</sup> To compare Kim's short story with these old tales is important in order to know how she changed the existing tales and what these changes tell us.

The tale of Chosin in *Samguk yusa* 三國遺事 (Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms) is a representative Buddhist tale about a lovesick monk. Yi Kwang-su adapted this tale for his successful novel *Kkum* 꿈 (*Dream*) in 1947. In order to identify the relationship with Kim's story, I will concisely summarize the tale first.<sup>46</sup> One day, a young monk, Chosin, sees the daughter of Kim Hŭn-gong and falls in love with her. He prays to Kwanŭm bodhisattva (*Kwanŭm posal* 觀音菩薩)<sup>47</sup> – Avalokitesvara – for help and falls asleep. In his dream, he marries her and they live happily together. But the happiness does not last forever. After forty years,

he can not afford to keep his large family. He even kills someone out of hunger. He becomes old. At last, he and his wife part from each other. At the moment of their bitter parting, Chosin awakes from his dream. Through the dream, Chosin has tasted all the sweetness and bitterness of life. He feels shame for his desire and behavior and becomes a widely admired monk.

[Table 1]

<b>Chosin tale</b>	<b>Kim Ir-yöp’s short story</b>
A lovesick monk	A love story of a monk and a woman
Has a crush on a girl who is engaged to someone else	A mendicant and a woman fall in love. She is engaged to someone else
Prays to Kwanūm bodhisattva and achieves love in his dream	Spend night together. The monk teaches her Buddhism
Awakes from his dream, has remorse for his passion and transgression of the vinaya	Recites a magic spell, changes their bodies into bluebirds, flies away to an eternal place
Love is an obstacle to the Buddhist practice	Love has a positive meaning to propagate Buddhism
Warns monks against degeneration	Achievement of love = attainment of the Buddhist goal

As is clearly shown in Table 1, both stories present young monks who fall in love with girls at the first glance. Both heroines are engaged to another man. Chosin achieves his love in his dream. The young monk and the young maiden in Kim’s story achieve their love, flying to an eternal place. But these two stories have crucial differences. Chosin awakes from his dream and perceives the transience of his passion. He feels remorse for his attachment and transgression against essential precepts. The mendicant in Kim’s story also breaks the *vinaya* (*yul/kye* 律/戒) precept (monastic rules and regulations) and spends the night with a woman. Nevertheless, he has limited inner conflict because of his transgressive behavior and feels little remorse or regret.

We notice that the big difference is in relation to the view of love (passion). The Chosin tale illustrates the traditional view of love as a big obstacle to Buddhist practice. A lovesick monk should be warned so that he becomes aware of his depravity and conforms to appropriate practice. The Chosin tale has such an edifying intention. However, the storyteller Kim Ir-yöp projects a different view. Love in her story is not an obstacle to Buddhism but has a positive meaning, as it helps to convert the young girl to Buddhism. The achievement of love and the propagation of Buddhism are compatible with each other. The edifying traditional tale is remade by Kim Ir-yöp into a love story between a monk and a woman.

For a related tale, dealing with the personification of Kwanseum bodhisattva, we can consider the tale of Podŏk, a legendary story associated with the Podŏk Hermitage (*Podŏg-am* 普德庵). This legend is not widely known to the public. The versions are varied. Therefore, I will summarize the tale on the basis of the “Record on head and branch temples of Yujŏmsa” (“Yujŏmsa pommal saji” 楡岾寺本末寺誌).<sup>48</sup> In the Koryŏ period, there was a young monk called Hoejŏng 懷正. In his dream, he received a call to find a person named Haemyŏngbang 解明方. Hoejŏng was able to find his house but he was not there. His daughter was alone. The young monk and the daughter slept together for several nights. He felt shame when he considered his sins and left her. The monk heard later that she was actually Kwanum bodhisattva. So, he re-visited her. The woman washed herself under a waterfall. She became a bird and fluttered into a grotto. Inside the grotto, he found a Buddhist scripture and an incense-burner. The monk (re)established a hermitage in that place.

[Table 2]

<b>Podŏk legendary story</b>	<b>Kim Ir-yŏp's short story</b>
A story about belief in Kwanum bodhisattva	A love story of a monk and a woman
A young monk Hoejŏng spent several nights with a girl whose father was absent	A mendicant visited a house and spent the night with a girl whose father was absent
He felt remorse for his sins and left her	He felt little remorse. Taught Buddhism and left the woman
Later heard that she was Kwanum bodhisattva and revisited her	Revisited her
The daughter changed herself into a bird and hid herself in a grotto	Both changed their bodies into bluebirds and flew away to an eternal place
A Buddhist scripture and an incense-burner were left behind	Their shoes were left behind
A bird as a sign of Kwanum bodhisattva	Bluebirds as a medium which makes possible things which are impossible, such as the forbidden love between a monk and a woman
A monk had a sincere belief in the supernatural power of Kwanum bodhisattva and re-established a temple	Two young people achieved their love as well as their Buddhist goal

As shown in the Table 2, the Podök tale has greater resemblances to Kim Ir-yöp's story than the former legend. A young monk Hoejōng visited a house where a woman was alone. Her father was absent for several days. He stayed with her and had a conjugal relationship with her. This series of incidents corresponds to those in Kim's story. The fact that Hoejōng left her and then revisited her is also similar to Kim's plot. What attracts our attention is the presence of birds. The daughter of Haemyōngbang changed her body into a bird and fluttered into the grotto. This transformation is not presented in the Chosin story. In Kim's story, the mendicant and the young maiden also become bluebirds and fly away to the eternal place. In the same way that the bird left a Buddhist scripture and an incense-burner behind, the two bluebirds in Kim's story leave their shoes behind.

Regardless of varied versions, the Podök legend is basically related to Kwanūm belief. Kwanūm bodhisattva, whose characteristic feature is compassion, manifests himself as an ordinary woman, tests or attracts the monks in practice, and ultimately leads them to enlightenment. In the same way, the daughter of Haemyōngbang attracts the young monk Hoejōng, informs him of her true nature as Kwanūm and in the end, leads him to awakening. The Buddhist scripture and the incense-burner are signs that she is actually Kwanūm. A white or blue bird and shoes are also typical symbols of Kwanūm as presented in a number of legends.<sup>49</sup>

However, the bluebirds and shoes in Kim Ir-yöp's story have little to do with Kwanūm. A sincere belief in Kwanūm's supernatural power and compassion is in no way presented in her story. Like the Chosin tale, the Podök tale about Kwanūm beliefs also warns a loose-living monk, allows him to feel remorse and leads to an awakening. Love, in that tale, represents temptation and is a hindrance to enlightenment. Kim's story, on the other hand, pursues the compatibility of love and Buddhism. As mentioned before, love is neither a temptation nor a regrettable thing. Bluebirds are used as a typical medium, which goes beyond time and space and which, therefore, makes impossible things possible. As in the folktale "The Pond-snail Maiden"<sup>50</sup> bluebirds make forbidden love between a monk and a young woman possible.

In short, Kim Ir-yöp, as a Buddhist woman, did not abandon the value of love within Buddhism. She took great interest in Buddhist legends about love and reconstructed them within her works of fiction. In the process of remaking them, she revolutionarily changed the conventional Buddhist view on passion. Nowhere in Buddhist legends can one find a love story in which a monk and a woman achieve lasting love. Love in these traditional tales is negatively viewed as an obstacle, temptation and degeneration. Kim Ir-yöp who had been an ardent advocate of free love, challenged such negative views about love and tried to discover a positive meaning in them. Therefore, she created a new relationship between Buddhism and love, one in which they complemented each other. Her attempt to tacitly amend traditional Buddhist legends represents the attempt of progressive Buddhists to metamorphose a new look of Korean Buddhism within the framework of a modern society.

### “Escape from Passion” (1932): Calling Renunciation into Question

The second short story “Escape from passion”<sup>51</sup> illustrates the realistic confrontation between love and Buddhism in the course of renunciation and portrays the experience of Korean Buddhism in modern times. This is the story of the lovers Hyŏng-sik and Hye-yŏng. The hero, Hyŏng-sik, leaves Hye-yŏng and enters a monastery. Hye-yŏng, in tears, writes letters to him calling his renunciation into question. Her letters deeply shake him and he takes his own life, leaving a note behind. His note says that his decomposing body can teach her the truth. Hye-yŏng feels remorse and meditates in repentance.

This is quite a short story but tackles the major Buddhist problem of *ch'ulga* 出家 (renunciation) in modern society. *Ch'ulga* means leaving one's home and abandoning one's dear wife, children, parents, and friends. In Buddhism, it is taught that one cannot end karmic relationships unless one leaves them. These karmic relationships become causes, which draw one again into the cycle of transmigration (*yunhoe* 輪廻). The renunciation by monks has usually been admired as a great deed, aimed at taking care of other living beings, while forgetting one's own comfortable life. For example, Shakyamuni's renunciation was admired as “Buddha's concern for universal rather than private well-being.”<sup>52</sup> However, recent Buddhist commentators such as Rita M. Gross have asked the question as to whether the Buddha was not, in fact, irresponsible and cruel and whether his actions did not leave his wife emotionally and economically vulnerable.<sup>53</sup> The many kinds of trouble, conflict, difficulty, and worries that often accompany renunciation have usually remained unexplored and hidden.

Kim Ir-yŏp's short story does not aim to praise Hyŏng-sik's resolution to enter the temple. Rather, she strives to uncover the problems and difficulties, which really occurred in colonial Korea. The Monk Ch'ŏngdam, for instance, ran away from women - his mother, wife and a daughter - and even went to a temple in Japan. At the end, he was caught by his mother and forced to conceive a son with his wife in order to continue the family lineage. He had to break the precept.<sup>54</sup> The protagonist Hyŏng-sik, in Kim Ir-yŏp's short story, also runs away from his lover in order to become a monk. However, the abandoned and uncared for lover, wife, children and parents suffer from economic and spiritual worries and agonies because of the action of their boyfriend, husband and father. For that reason, the Monk Unhŏ was forced to bring his family near to his temple.<sup>55</sup>

The reformist monk Han Yong-un 韓龍雲 (1879-1944) saw reclusiveness as a serious problem facing Korean Buddhism. In his early treatise, *The Reformation of Korean Buddhism* (*Chosŏn pulgyo yusillon* 朝鮮佛教維新論, 1913), he was already arguing that the very act of reclusiveness hinders the promotion of Buddhism, since it is a great challenge to leave home and society. Although monks engage on this course, they continue to worry about their family and friends in the outside world and cannot concentrate on their Buddhist study and practice. He claimed that renunciation was unnecessary. According to him, Buddhism teaches *sasamuae*

事事無碍 (unimpeded interrelatedness), which indicates a non-distinction between Buddhist circles and the secular world. Therefore, leaving home is not the core of Buddhism, but only a tool *upaya* (*pangp'yŏn* 方便), which should be adjusted to the circumstances. He even advocated the marriage of monks. Giving examples of many excellent married Buddhists in the past, he asks if they were bad monks because of their marital status. Most of all, he discusses the marriage of monks as a necessary condition for Buddhism to keep pace with modern society. The modern state needs populating. If everyone abided by the Buddhist rules of the *vinaya*, then mankind would be extinguished. Therefore, it is immoral. The marriage of monks, according to Han Yong-un, makes Buddhism accessible to people in the modern age.<sup>56</sup>

The issue raised by Han Yong-un, i.e. that although people leave home and enter the temple, they still worry about their family and experience conflicts because of them, is vividly expressed in Kim Ir-yŏp's short story (surprisingly, Han himself never fictionalized this topic). The protagonist, Hyŏng-sik, has already left home. In principle, he should forget all of his previous relationships and secular concerns. However, his intense meditation is interrupted by a single letter from his lover.

My eyes looked for Hye-yŏng. My hands were unable to respond to her letter. My legs failed to go to her. I fell in sleep, hugging her letter. Like a baby who falls asleep hungry, and wakes up over and over crying for milk twisting his body, I was overwhelmed by my passion. At last, I could not withstand the call of my passion any more.<sup>57</sup>

This paragraph shows the protagonist's worries, troubles, and inner conflicts. Most of all, it is notable that his troubles are derived from the collision between Buddhism and passion. More specifically, his inner conflict is due to his passion for a woman. He realizes that he cannot suppress his physical desire any more, unless he disappears from this world. Thus, he decides to abandon his body that has been overwhelmed by passion. Love and Buddhism confront each other. Love is obviously defined as an obstacle to Buddhist practice; passion cannot be compatible with Buddhism. The confrontation between love and Buddhism in the monk's mind finally drives him to take his life.

However, it is important to know that his death is not suicide but rather a mysterious disappearance. There is no description of his actual death. When his body is found, only his letter tells us that he "has left." Kim Ir-yŏp ambiguously relates that some medical doctors examined the corpse but that there was no trace of him having taken poison or any fatal damages to it. Hyŏng-sik leaves his physical body, rather than dying. Somehow, this is reminiscent of the shoes, the Buddhist scripture or the incense-burner in the old Buddhist legends. Its effect is similar. Seeing his body left behind, the heroine converts to Buddhism, feels remorse and repents. The confrontation between love and Buddhism ends with the triumph of Buddhism over love. Hyŏng-sik's decomposing corpse teaches impermanence (*musang* 無常), that everything is in a state of continual change and nothing stays

as it is. The protagonist's corpse functions as a skillful means (*upaya*) of leading the heroine to Buddhism and inducing repentance. In the light of these effects, the protagonist's act in leaving his body behind encompasses the essential meaning of compassion, similar to that depicted in the Kwanŭm tales.

Although Buddhism wins in the confrontation with passion (this might imply that Kim Ir-yŏp adapted herself to the male-dominated monastic community), it is very important to know that Kim Ir-yŏp provides an opportunity for the heroine to give voice to her emotional and spiritual torment. As mentioned before, lamentations or complaints from the abandoned party have, traditionally, been neglected and even condemned. In his play on Shakyamuni's *ch'ulga* 出家 (1938), Hong Sa-yong 洪思容 (1900-47), for example, depicts Shakyamuni as shaking off his wife Princess Yashodhara's hand while scolding her, "You silly woman. One who obstructs my way will be cursed. Family and relatives are all demons."<sup>58</sup> In Kim's story, the heroine Hye-yŏng, however, is not depicted as a passive woman. The heroine fervently pronounces her feelings of frustration and helplessness. Her agony and vulnerability are voiced very well.

You said that the true aim of Buddhist practitioner is to save sentient beings. It does not make sense that you cannot help but abandon a suffering sentient being rather than caring for her.<sup>59</sup>

In this way, the heroine sharply points out the contradiction of salvation of sentient beings. The woman not only condemns both the motives and actions of her lover, but also questions the presence of the sangha itself, which advocates salvation of sentient beings in the remote place where sentient beings are absent. Not only does she complain, but also she makes a powerful appeal to the reader. The heroine displays her power and the greatness of her love in not wanting to hinder his serene volition and chosen way. This voice of a deserted person demonstrates that Kim Ir-yŏp did not write this work merely to celebrate the victory of Buddhism over love. Rather, she denounces the fact that the traditionally admired course of *ch'ulga* has become a big problem in modern society. Her realistic approach uncovers more troubles and agony, which every Korean Buddhist has experienced but has had to suffer in silence throughout history.

## Conclusion

So far, I have examined Kim Ir-yŏp's Buddhist short stories about love. These writings are very important sources in showing how a New Woman, who claimed and practiced modernity in the form of free love, was reborn as a Buddhist, someone who tried to chart a course for Korean Buddhism from troubled tradition towards modernization. In reality, both the love and marriage of monks were widely practiced in colonial Korea. Post-colonial scholarship diagnoses such a phenomenon as a kind of "bad" influence of Japanese Buddhism, which seemingly aimed to defile

the pure tradition of Korean Buddhism, or as a mirror of the deteriorated condition of contemporary Korean Buddhism. The debate can easily spread to controversies in relation to celibate and married monks in the purification movement (*kyōdan chōnghwa undong* 교단정화운동).<sup>60</sup> However, the phenomenon should also be discussed in terms of modernity. For that reason, I have first sketched how love became a sign of modernity in the colonial society of the time and then discussed how Kim Ir-yōp, as one of the Buddhist reformers and a Buddhist woman, was aware of its implications and how her Buddhist works of fiction reflect a Buddhist discourse on modernity in colonial Korea by dealing with the issue of passion.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Her real name is Wōn-ju. Ir-yōp is her pen name. This name, given by Yi Kwang-su 李光洙 (1892-1950), was taken from a famous Japanese female poet Higuchi Ichiyō 樋口一葉 (1872-96) to encourage a promising female poet. In this paper, I will use her pen name instead of her real name because the former is widely known to the public.
- <sup>2</sup> I took this term from Kwōn Podūrae's book [*The age of love: a cultural trend of early 1920s Korea*].
- <sup>3</sup> We can consider only two studies which deal with Kim Ir-yōp's Buddhist writings: one is Bonnie Oh's "Kim Ir-yōp's Conflicting Worlds" and the other is Jin Y. Park's "Gendered Response to Modernity."
- <sup>4</sup> In "Mu'rūl anūn munhwain: hūllōgan yōinsang'ūl ilkko" 無를 아는 文化人: "홀러간 女人像"을 읽고 ["Nothingness and cultivation: a review on *Portrait of women in the past*"] in Kim Ir-yōp, *Miraesega tahago namtorok* 未來世가 다하고 남도록 [*Beyond the end of the future*], 284-294. [Further abbreviated as *Miraese*].
- <sup>5</sup> Park, Jin Y. "Gendered Response to Modernity: Kim Ir-yōp and Buddhism."
- <sup>6</sup> Kathy Peiss and Christina Simmons, *Passion and Power*, 7.
- <sup>7</sup> Kim Kyōng-il, [*Modernity in women, women in modernity*], 121-124; Pak Yong-ok, ["A study on New Women of 1920s through *Sinyōja* and *Sinyōsōng* magazines"]
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 214-240. In her essay, ["Rumors: A microscopic power over personal spaces"], Kim Yōn-suk also examines rumors around New Women.
- <sup>9</sup> Yi Ūn-gyōng, ["Motherhood: A space of insanity, suicide, and disgrace"], 118-119.
- <sup>10</sup> Sin Myōng-jik, [*A modern boy walks the streets of Seoul*], 49-57.
- <sup>11</sup> Yoo Sun-young, "Embodiment of American modernity in colonial Korea," 423-441.
- <sup>12</sup> In *Chosōn Ilbo* 朝鮮日報 (16 July 1930).
- <sup>13</sup> Sin Myōng-jik, [*A modern boy walks the streets of Seoul*], 41-49.
- <sup>14</sup> Ch'ōn Chōng-hwan, [*Reading books in the modern period: The birth of readers and modern Korean literature*], 348-349.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 64-76.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 157-167.
- <sup>17</sup> Kim Kyōng-il, [*Modernity in women, women in modernity*], 125-144; Song Yōn-ok, ["New Women's discourses of nationalism and gender"], 92-112; and Theodore Jun Yoo, "The 'New Woman' and the politics of Love, Marriage and Divorce in Colonial Korea," 304-309.
- <sup>18</sup> Theodore Jun Yoo, "The 'New Woman' and the politics of Love, Marriage and Divorce in Colonial Korea," 309-312. Particularly in relation to women's education, Kim Kyōng-il's essay is a good reference: ["Women's education and New Women in colonial Korea"].
- <sup>19</sup> For recent studies about New Women and their collaboration with the state/nation, see Im U-

gyöng, ["Colonized women and the imagined nation or state"]; Choi Kyeong-Hee, "Another Layer of Pro-Japanese Literature: Choi Chunhui's 'The Wild Chrysanthemum'"; or Song Yön-ok, ["New Women's discourses of nationalism and gender"].

- <sup>20</sup> Theodore Jun Yoo, "The 'New Woman' and the politics of Love, Marriage and Divorce in Colonial Korea," 312-316.
- <sup>21</sup> Kim Yöng-hüi, "From Subservience to Autonomy: Kim Wön-ju's 'Awakening,'" 6.
- <sup>22</sup> Kim Ir-yöp, *Miraese* vol. 2, 215.
- <sup>23</sup> See the autobiographical book of Kim T'ae-sin, [*A monk painting his mother*].
- <sup>24</sup> Despite her feminist claims, Na Hye-sök was, in fact, a prudent and wise housewife. According to an eyewitness account of Kim Ir-yöp, her wardrobe was never disorganized. Kim Ir-yöp also maintained that Yi Kwang-su was greatly indebted to his wife Hō Yöng-suk for his health and reputation. See Kim Ir-yöp, *Miraese* 1, 352-363.
- <sup>25</sup> "Na-üi chöngjo kwan" 나의貞操觀 ["My view of woman's chastity"] in *Chosön Ilbo* (Jan. 1927). Republished in Kim Ir-yöp, *Miraese* vol. 2, 156-159.
- <sup>26</sup> Kim Ir-yöp, *Miraese* vol. 2, 156.
- <sup>27</sup> *Tong-A Ilbo* 東亞日報 (13. 08. 1920). Re-referred from Theodore Jun Woo, "The 'New Woman' and the politics of Love, Marriage and Divorce in Colonial Korea," 308.
- <sup>28</sup> As examples, we can consider three good references: Elaine H. Kim and Ch'oe Chungmu (ed), *Dangerous Women: Gender & Korean Nationalism*; Laurel Kendall (ed), *Under Construction: The Gendering of Modernity, Class, and Consumption in the Republic of Korea*; Dina Lowy, *The Japanese "New Woman": Images of Gender and Modernity*.
- <sup>29</sup> Kwon, In-suk. "'The New Women's Movement' in 1920s Korea: Rethinking the Relationship between Imperialism and Women."
- <sup>30</sup> See Sheila Miyoshi Jager, "Signs of Love for the Nation."
- <sup>31</sup> Im Ok-hüi, ["A classification of New Women"], 83.
- <sup>32</sup> Na Hye-sök, "Sinsaenghwar-e tülmyönsö" 신생활에 들면서 ["Starting a new life"] in *Samch'ölli* (Feb. 1935). Re-printed in [*Na Hye-sök chönjip*], 433-435.
- <sup>33</sup> "Sakpal hago changsamibün Kim Ir-yöp yösa'üi hoekyönggi" 削髮하고長衫입은金一葉女史의會見記 ["An interview of Dawn with a tonsured Kim Ir-yöp in a Buddhist robe"] and Yi Myöng-on, [*Portrait of women of the past*], 20-74.
- <sup>34</sup> Park P'o-ri, "Korean Buddhist Reforms and Problems in the Adoption of Modernity during the Colonial Period," 88.
- <sup>35</sup> For details about Buddhist journals, see Henrik H. Sørensen, "Korean Buddhist Journals during Early Japanese Colonial Rule."
- <sup>36</sup> To identify major issues in modern Korean Buddhism, we can consider two studies: Kim Kyöng-jip, ["Major topics of studies on modern Korean Buddhism"] and Kim Kwang-sik, [*Reconsideration of modern and contemporary Korean Buddhism*].
- <sup>37</sup> Evon, Gregory N. "Eroticism and Buddhism in *Your Silence*."
- <sup>38</sup> Park, Jin Y. "Gendered Response to Modernity: Kim Ir-yöp and Buddhism."
- <sup>39</sup> In *Pulgyo* 55 (Jan. 1929). Republished in Kim Ir-yöp, *Miraese* vol. 1, 189-199.
- <sup>40</sup> As is widely known, Wönhyo broke his vows and had a relationship with Princess Yosök.
- <sup>41</sup> Kyönghö was an outspoken Sön master who brought about a renaissance of Sön Buddhism in modern times. However, he drank wine and had contact with women in the last years of his life.
- <sup>42</sup> There are five essays on the theme of snake published in the 55<sup>th</sup> edition of *Pulgyo* from "Sawa Pulgyo'e kwanhan sörwä" 蛇와佛敎에關한說話 ["Folk tales about snakes and Buddhism"], "Öbin'gwa kümsabo" 業因과金蛇報 ["Causality and retribution of a golden snake"], to "Sama" 蛇魔 ["A snake demon"] of which the full text was censored and deleted by the colonial administration.

- <sup>43</sup> In *Pulgyo* 50/51 (Sep. 1928). Republished in Kim Ir-yöp, *Miraese* vol. 2, 246-249.
- <sup>44</sup> Kim Ir-yöp, *Miraese* vol. 1, 189.
- <sup>45</sup> Besides, according to Boudewijn Walraven, the beginning of this story is identical to the shaman song, “Tangküm aegi muga” 당금애기 무가 [A shaman song about Little Tangküm]
- <sup>46</sup> Iryön, *Samguk yusa*, 247-251.
- <sup>47</sup> Tae-Hung Ha and Grafton K. Mintz translated Kwanüm Bodhisattva as a “goddess of mercy.” Yet, I have chosen the designation of “Kwanseüm bodhisattva” to emphasize the role of bodhisattva in the associated Buddhist tales.
- <sup>48</sup> Kwön Sang-no, [Collected stories affiliated to Korean temples], 478-483.
- <sup>49</sup> Iryön, *Samguk yusa*, 245-246.
- <sup>50</sup> Ch’oe Rae-ok, [A study on folk tales in Korea], 118-121.
- <sup>51</sup> In *Samch’ölli* (April 1932). Republished in Kim Ir-yöp, *Miraese* vol. 1, 232-241.
- <sup>52</sup> Rita M. Gross, *Buddhism after Patriarchy*, 17.
- <sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.
- <sup>54</sup> Yun Ch’öng-gwang, [Lives of eminent monks 24], 15-96.
- <sup>55</sup> Yun Ch’öng-gwang, [Lives of eminent monks 19], 187-193.
- <sup>56</sup> Han Yong-un, *Han Yong-un chönjip* vol. 2, 82-87.
- <sup>57</sup> Kim Ir-yöp, *Miraese* vol. 1, 240.
- <sup>58</sup> In *Hyöndaee Chosönmunhak chönjip* 現代朝鮮文學全集 [Collected works of modern Korean literature] (Sep. 1938). Republished in Hong Sa-yong, *Hong Sa-yong chönjip*, 265.
- <sup>59</sup> Kim Ir-yöp, *Miraese* vol. 1, 238.
- <sup>60</sup> For details about the purification movement, we can consider the following three references: Kim Kwang-sik, [Reconsideration of modern and contemporary Korean Buddhism]; Kang In-ch’öl, [“Buddhism and the state after liberation (1945-1960)”]; Song Wöl-ju, and Yun Süng-yong, [The purification movement and today’s Chogye Order].

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Illustrations



Figure 1. Caricature of Kim Ir-yŏp in *Samch'ŏlli* (March 1933).



Figure 2. "Summer 1930" in *Chosŏn Ilbo* (July 1930).

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# 파랑새로화한두靑春

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葉

넋날이야기라고할지 · 傳說이라고할지모르는이  
덧슬찌한번드문뜻도하고 언제살에한번은뜻도한이  
깃한이야기외하나다.

……佛敎第五十五卷……

○  
성신공덕을지어드리려찾습니다  
나루야미 렉! 불

Figure 3. The original text of Kim Ir-yöp's short story "Two lovers and bluebirds" published in *Pulgyo* 55 (Jan. 1929).