

# H-Net Reviews

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Vladimir Tikhonov, Owen Miller, trans. *Selected Writings of Han Yongun: From Social Darwinism to Socialism With a Buddhist Face*. Folkestone: Global Oriental, 2008. vii + 263 pp. \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-905246-47-2.

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## Global Attention to a Global Buddhist Thinker: Bringing a Leading Modern Korean Buddhist to an Anglophone Readership

Tikhonov and Miller have done us a great service in producing the first monograph-length publication in English to treat the Buddhist thought of the Korean Buddhist monk Han Yongun (1879-1944). Known by his monastic sobriquet Manhae, Han enjoys continued renown in his land as a poet and as an activist for national independence, but remains largely unknown even to scholars of Buddhism in the West and Japan.[1] This welcome volume not only introduces Han as a Buddhist thinker, but also represents the first collection of scholarly translations into English of primary historical materials from modern (late nineteenth/early twentieth century) Korean Buddhism. As such, it gestures toward an “internationalization” of Han Yongun studies—particularly valuable because one of the volume’s chief contributions lies in showing just how deeply Han himself engaged with some of the global intellectual trends of his world. These included Social Darwinism, socialism, and nationalism. After the insightful introduction, which acknowledges such varied influences upon Han as Liang Qichao (1873-1929), Japanese Buddhist reform movements, and Christian socialism, the volume offers translations grouped into three headings: “Korean and World Buddhism,” “Criticism of the Anti-Religion Movement,” and “Memoirs.”

Of particular interest in this volume is the translation in the first section of Han’s early treatise “On the Reform of Korean Buddhism” (*Chosŏn Pulgyo yusillon*, 1910),

heretofore available to readers of English only in excerpts.[2] Tikhonov and Miller point out that from the 1970s onward, Han Yongun was rediscovered and appropriated by left-leaning *minjung* (mass-oriented) nationalists in the Republic of Korea (p. 11). This later history of reinvention is particularly fascinating, given that “On the Reformation of Korean Buddhism” evinces little sympathy for popular Buddhist practice in turn-of-the-twentieth-century Korea. In his specific prescriptions for the reform of popular Buddhism, Han condemns a range of practices deeply linked to common Buddhist devotion: (1) the recitation of the name of the Buddha Amitābha (Ch. *nianfo*, Kor. *yŏmbul*) (pp. 69-73); (2) the worship of a pantheon of sacred figures from “Buddhist” and “folk” traditions, instead of devotion to the single image of the historical Buddha, Śākyamuni (pp. 88-96); and (3) the practice of the “economy of merit,” by which laypeople make offering to monks to memorialize the dead, and monks make themselves available for this purpose as “fields of merit” (pp. 96-99).[3] Far from demonstrating an investment in the lives and practices of Korea’s Buddhist laity, these proposals imply a deep suspicion of the very forms of devotion that would have typified the *minjung* Buddhism of his day. Indeed, one overarching pattern to emerge from the text as a whole is an advocacy of top-down reform in Korean Buddhism, guided and managed by elite educational and monastic institutions. Of course, we should not take this proposal as the final articulation of Han’s thought about the re-

form of Korean Buddhism. On pp. 26-27, the introduction briefly touches on his later, and shorter, *Project for the Reform of Korean Buddhism* (*Chosŏn Pulgyo Kaehyŏk an*, 1931), whose translation and publication in the near future is a definite desideratum.

The introduction accounts for the proposals of “On the Reform of Korean Buddhism” by invoking “influence from the more radical quarters of the contemporaneous New Buddhist movement in Japan” (p. 10). While such influence is certainly plausible, much of the text of “On the Reformation”—and much of the rest of the texts translated in this volume—might also be profitably seen as a local, Korean version of a much wider, global “modern Buddhism,” which Donald Lopez has provocatively described as “not ... a universal religion beyond sectarian borders, but as itself a Buddhist sect.”[4] It is to the global circulation of new ideas about “Buddhism” that we must look to account for the young Han Youngun’s confidence that “Buddhism lacks nothing in relation to the rest of human civilization; on the contrary, it possesses a variety of outstanding features” (p. 44); his assurance that “the golden rules of philosophy, Eastern and Western, old and new, are nothing more than commentaries on the Buddhist sutras” (p. 52); and his willingness to expand the boundaries of what constitutes “Buddhism,” such that “[w]hen we consider Buddhism’s doctrines, they represent such a profound, broad truth that [clerical] marriage or its prohibition can hardly damage or benefit them” (p. 113). Thus, in what recent scholarship now enables us to recognize as utterly typical “modern Buddhist” fashion, Han ceded nothing to Christianity in praising the profundity of Buddhism, even as he simultaneously mimicked, and occasionally inverted, the attacks by Christian missionaries on Buddhist “superstition,” “backwardness,” and “idolatry.” Han is typically “modern Buddhist” in other senses as well. Like their counterparts elsewhere in the Buddhist world, some Korean “modern Buddhists” began to promote lay meditation, and the present volume includes translations of two published essays in which Han promoted Sŏn (Chan/Zen) meditation (Kor. *ch’amsŏn*) to a mass audience (“Mediation and Human Life,” pp. 165-180, and “Meditation Outside of Meditation,” pp. 181-192). It is hoped that this translation will stimulate further research linking Han and his contemporaries more closely to movements elsewhere in the modern Buddhist world.

The selections by Tikhonov and Miller also afford us a glimpse of the more general position of Buddhism within Korean society in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The excerpts from an interview with

the nationalist press in 1931, “Sakyamuni’s Spirit,” eloquently suggest the difficulties that Buddhists had in confronting ethno-nationalism. In this interview, Han steadfastly parries the interviewer’s repeated suggestions that were Śākyamuni reborn in modern Korea, he would have been interested first of all in the salvation of the nation, as opposed to the salvation of all sentient beings (pp. 158-164). Meanwhile, Han’s memoirs of his early travels outside Korea proper read like a catalogue of abuse: traveling in Manchuria, he is shot, unprovoked, by emigrant Korean youths (p. 230); traveling in the Russian Far East, he and his companions are scolded by a hostile Korean emigrant for not demonstrating proper deference to the laity: “‘You don’t seem like monks. If you were really monks how could you remain seated with your legs crossed when we entered?’” (p. 245). In both cases, only the intervention of non-Koreans saves Han’s life. Although fragmentary and anecdotal, these passages imply that at the dawn of modernity, Korean Buddhist monastics were certainly not held in universal respect, even by their own people, and that the incipient Korean nationalist movement had little knowledge about and less use for Buddhist thought and practice.

Well known in Korea under his naturalized name of Pak Noja, Tikhonov has already published over half a dozen books and countless articles in the progressive press there. They critically treat themes including modernity, national identity, and Buddhism. Miller is an up-and-coming historian whose published academic work has to date focused on late Chosŏn-dynasty economic history. The two have clearly labored hard to bring into English these works of Han Yongun. The heavily Sinitized language of “On the Reform of Korean Buddhism,” for instance, differs sufficiently from today’s standard written Korean to require a vernacular translation for a non-specialist Korean readership. Written Korean was a language in flux during Han’s lifetime; its vocabulary, grammar, and even written script were changing in dramatic ways that have yet to be analyzed comprehensively in Anglophone scholarship.

In treating this language, the translators of the present volume have consistently resorted to what we might call “domesticating” over “foreignizing” strategies, to use the analysis of the German philosopher Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834).[5] For instance, when Han in the original discusses the two main principles of Buddhism as *p’yŏngdŭngjuŭi* and *kusejuŭi*, Tikhonov and Miller render these two with the familiar English terms “egalitarianism” and “altruism.” As their footnote acknowledges, though, the latter term literally means

something closer to the “principle of saving the world” (p. 133), and Han explains it in terms of the willingness of the bodhisattva to be reborn in any realm, however evil, in the interest of saving all suffering sentient beings. In explaining the first term, meanwhile, Han has recourse to a fairly standard Buddhist account of the technical term *p’yōngdŭng* (Ch. *pingdeng*) as “signifying the unhampered, unconditional truth, transcendent of time and space” (p. 54). In the transcendent sense of universally possessing the Buddha-nature, for instance, all sentient beings are the same—“equal”—whatever their superficial differences. This sense is far removed from the political significance with which most English speakers now endow the term “egalitarianism.” However, in the very next paragraph of the translation, Han goes on to link the specifically Buddhist sense of the word with the exercise of personal freedoms as restrained only by the imperative not to infringe upon others’ freedoms—a definition considerably closer to what we typically mean today by “egalitarian behavior” (p.55). The translation poses particular difficulty because throughout modern East Asia, the Buddhist technical term *p’yōngdŭng*—signifying a kind of metaphysical equality wholly compatible with vast differences in social status and political privilege—was pressed into service as a translation for the Euro-American “equality” or “égalité.”[6] How then to translate *p’yōngdŭngjuūi*, when Han himself uses the key term in both its Buddhist and modern senses? One does not envy Tikhonov and Miller the task of coping with such problems, and the “domesticating” strategy of translation, which seeks above all to open a text to a new readership, may indeed be the most prudent way to cope with such a situation.

As a well-chosen collection of accessible translations, this volume will be of interest to a variety of communities of readers: scholars of Buddhism in Northeast Asia, to be sure, but also scholars of modern Korean literary and intellectual history. Historians interested in the policies toward religion of the early Soviet state, or by analogy the state’s treatment of religion from the last years of Imperial China through Republican China, will also find Han’s rebuttal of the “anti-religious movements” well worth reading. The volume is well documented, with ample use of Chinese characters in the notes to the introduction, the

glossary of Chinese characters, and the index. Such devices are indispensable in opening up scholarship on Korean Buddhism to scholars of other forms of East Asian Buddhism, and the translators and Global Oriental are to be commended for including them. We should look forward eagerly to further work on this period—including more translations of important primary sources—from these two fine scholars.

#### Notes

[1]. Of course, he is well known to specialists of Korean Buddhism in both. On the continued general unfamiliarity of Han Yongun in Japanese Buddhist circles, see Fukushi Jimin, “Chōsen Bukkyō no saitai mondai: *Chōsen Bukkyō ishin ron o chūshin to shite*,” *Shūkyō kenkyū* 79, no. 4 (March 2006): 276.

[2]. For instance, a very short excerpt appears in Peter H. Lee, ed., *Sourcebook of Korean Civilization*, vol. 2 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 497-500.

[3]. The long-term effects of Han’s proposals here have yet to receive sustained consideration in Anglophone scholarship. For instance, is there any connection between Han’s suggestion that the panoply of Buddhist images be reduced to a single object of worship and the unitary designation of the *irwōnsang* as the closest thing to a “Buddha image” to be used in Wōn Buddhist meditation? On the *irwōnsang*, see Michael Pye, “Won Buddhism as a Korean New Religion,” *Numen* 49, no. 2 (2002): 136.

[4]. Donald S. Lopez, Jr., “Introduction,” in *A Modern Buddhist Bible: Essential Readings from East and West* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), xxxix.

[5]. See Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator’s Invisibility: A History of Translation* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 19-20.

[6]. See the article “Byōdō” in *Hōbōgirin; dictionnaire encyclopédique du bouddhisme d’après les sources chinoises et japonaises, publié sous le haut patronage de l’Académie impériale du Japon et sous la direction de Sylvain Lévi et J. Takakusu*, vol. 1 (Tokyo: Maison franco-japonaise, 1929), 271.

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