

The root of Christianity in Korea

Encounter: An English Version of Mannam

by Moo-Sook Han

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Review by Han Lee (Winter 1997 issue)

Encounter, published by the University of California Press, Berkeley, is a translation of *Mannam* by Moo-Sook Han, a historical novelization of the eventful life of scholar-statesman Tasan and the persecution of Christianity during its beginnings as a new religion in the Hermit Kingdom. *Encounter* is billed on its cover as A Novel of Nineteenth-Century Korea.

I have long enjoyed M.S. Han's writings since the '60's, and have an unqualified admiration for her as a writer. I still remember some of her early short stories that the literary journal *Hyun-dae-moon-hag*, used to publish frequently. Two years ago, I read both volumes of *Mannam*. So engaging was the writing that it turned out to be an overnight, no-sleep read. It was a feverish and long night.

However, when I first saw the English rendition, I did not immediately realize that it was a novel that I had previously read. I recognized only the writer's name. The reason may have been that the original version, written in two volumes and entitled *Mannam*, had used a late Yee Dynasty painting of a scholar's bookshelf on the cover of both books 1 and 2, while the cover of *Encounter* showed a silhouette of a pavilion, in a caricaturish and structurally inaccurate manner. Was it thought that such a simple-minded cover would grab the attention of English speaking readers?

Curiously enough, *Encounter* does not include the writer's preface which is in the original version, *Mannam*. In the preface, the author writes about why she was interested in Tasan. To her, Tasan was someone who had lived ahead of his time and high above every one around him. His knowledge was boundless; his vision, vast; his understanding of ancient and contemporary studies, thorough and clear; his acceptance of novel ideas and inventions, rational. His unique and maverick ideas put him at the center of controversy, and made the shadow of death closely follow him throughout his life. Tasan authored over 700 volumes of books in his time including much work written during an 18-year exile. This quantity of work has been considered the most prolific since the invention of the Chinese characters. Each book showed a penetrating understanding and broad vision into the subject matter he was writing about. His areas of interest were diverse — citizenship, philosophy, public policy, taxation, and Christian apologetics, among others.

The writer ponders why, with all his ideals, his pragmatic approach to life, and his sense of social justice, was he not successful in bringing about a basic social revolution, and why did he ultimately only concentrate on his own obsession with humanity? His greatness, his contradictions, and his frailty as a human being, all arrested the writer's

attention. The nature of his failings and errors were all so human that they became to her no less impressive than all his accomplishments. In contrast to Tasan's tentativeness, his nephew, Hasang Paul Jung, canonized as a saint in 1984, maintained his faith without any trace of doubt, and gladly accepted his death. Hasang's life was innocence itself. The lives of both Tasan and Hasang, says the writer, have cleansing effect on her mind.

Tasan was a scholar and statesman who lived in the 18th and 19th centuries in Korea, when along with Western culture and tools, Christianity began to flow in to the country. Born Yag-yong Jung on June 16, 1762 in Gwang-joo, Gyung-gi-do, he died on February 22, 1836 at the age of 75, Tasan was his pen name, meaning tea growing mountain, a reference to the location of his exile where tea plants were grown.

For those who are not familiar with the historical background of the novel, a few paragraphs of introduction might be in order.

Josun, or known as Chosen and referred to as Yi Dynasty, had based its national idealism on Confucianism, a philosophy of relationships between people and within a society; and a form of Jujahag or Sungreehag, related to the I-Ching, a philosophy of the nature of the universe. However, eventually this idealism stagnated, and turned vacuous, rhetorical, and ultimately suffocating. It ceased to be helpful for the people. When the dynasty was in its latter years, Korea was subject to two foreign invasions: the first by the Japanese in 1592, lasting six years; and the second, by the Chinese in 1627, lasting ten years. These invasions drained the nation of all her resources. Up to this point in time, Korea had not known Christianity.

During the Japanese invasion, though, one of the generals, Konishi Ukinaka sent for a Catholic priest from Japan. As a response Father Gregorio de Cespedes, a Spaniard, accompanied by Brother Foucan Eion, a Japanese, were dispatched to Korea in early 1594. Political intrigue interrupted Cespedes' stay in Korea, however, and without much contact with Koreans, he left for Japan the following year. He was mainly serving the Japanese army. When the war was over, some of the Koreans who were taken to Japan became Catholics there, and later they were persecuted along with the Japanese Catholics. It was recorded that nine Koreans became the Blessed, and 11, the Martyred. Of the 26 Japanese saints, three are believed to be Koreans.

Following the Chinese invasion, the Korean Crown Prince So-hyun and Prince Bong-rim were taken to China. There So-hyun was befriended with Jesuit Father J. Adam Shall von Bell, who also was a renowned scholar, well-versed in the theory of calendars and astronomy, and served the Chinese court as one of the top statesmen. The Korean Crown Prince was mainly interested in the European science and knowledge that the priests possessed. In turn, Father Shall was mainly interested in a chance to spread the Gospel to Korea. When the Prince returned to Korea, he exchanged gifts with Shall. Shall's gifts included books on astronomy and methods of calculation for calendars, a model of the heavenly bodies, other scientific instruments, and a few books on Catholicism along with the portrait of the Savior. But the Prince returned the religious items to Shall, saying that Korea was not ready for those gifts, and he feared that it might be unintended insult to

take such sacred items to Korea. He arrived in Korea in February 1645, and in about two months of his arrival, he suddenly died, and all the expectation of his role in spreading the Gospel evaporated.

In the beginning of the 17th century, a Chinese version of Catholic writings, along with new world maps priests produced in China and other European scientific instruments started to trickle into Korea. These imports gave an indelible impression to Korean scholars who were hungry for new and practical thoughts and matters. Particularly those who were critical to the existing system based on Confucianism breathed in all they could, and eventually formed a Western Studies Group.

Like water over the dam, by the 18th century Western instruments were imported along with the Western knowledge. Some scholars began question the intellectual and spiritual basis on which such “instruments” were invented. The Catholicism brought to China was thought to be the basis of all the useful inventions. And some of the Korean scholars started to seriously study Catholicism. Whenever they had a chance to travel to China, they sought out Catholic writings and met with the Catholic fathers there. Some of the scholars subscribed to the practical and advantageous instruments from the West, while others took the new religion to their hearts. They kept Sabbath, performed prayers and abstained from eating meat and carnal indulgences. Tasan was one of those scholars.

Seung-hoon Lee became the first Korean to be baptized in Peking by Father J. J. de Grammont and was given the name of Peter. It was toward the end of January 1784, just before he returned to Korea. Within the first year of his return, Catholicism spread to Seoul, and three places in Kyunggi-do Province, two locations in Choongchung-do Province, and two cities in Junra-do Province. Korean Christianity thus started in a most unique manner: a spontaneous beginning without involving evangelists or missionaries.

In the spring of 1785, a group of people, Tasan among them, was arrested while attending a Catholic study meeting. Most of the upper class participants were released following reprimand, except Bum-oo Kim, who was exiled and died in his exile, becoming the first martyred Korean.

There existed an unreconcilable problem between the new religion and the Confucianism’s ancestral worship. Traditionally, Koreans offer commemorative rites to their deceased ancestors, and it was determined by Franciscan Bishop A. Gouvea in Peking, in late 1790, that this was a form of idolatry, and he ordered that Christians must not engage in these rituals. Quite a blow to the Korean Catholics, this order divided them into two groups; one group left Catholicism altogether; and the other stuck to their faith but abandoned ancestor worship. For most Koreans, abandoning the ancestral worship was unthinkable. It was a heresy, immoral and depraved. They called the Western Studies Group, particularly the Catholics, heretics for being people with “no kings, and no fathers (to bow to).” Two Catholics, Ji-choong Yoon and Sang-yun Kwun, on December 8, 1791 in Junjoo, were executed by beheading for their “crime” of abandoning the ancestor worship.

Aside from the issue of conflicting social values and the new religion, there was political unrest during this time, caused by the weakening of the monarchy. There were quick changes in power, and every time the power shifted, bloody executions were the result.

The Shin-yoo (the name of the year 1801) Persecution involved over 300 executions of the Catholics. Among them were Prince Eun-won-goon and his wife Song, their daughter-in-law Shin, and Father Moon-mo Joo, a Chinese delegated to Korea by Bishop Gouvea, who had been secretly working among the Catholics since his illegal entry to Korea on December 23, 1794. Joo voluntarily surrendered in an attempt to save other Catholics from execution. At this time, Tasan renounced his faith, and escaped execution (in part because of his scholarly accomplishments). Rather than be beheaded, Tasan went into exile.

A Catholic, Sa-yung Hwang, while in hiding, wrote now famous Hwang Sa-yung Silk Letter (now in Vatican). This letter was composed of 13,311 characters on silk, and was about the persecutions in detail, and requesting foreign powers to intercede the Korean kingdom in order to save the Catholics there. Before this was sent to Peking, the letter was found and another persecution followed, in which over 100 were executed and over 400 exiled. Because of the Silk Letter, the Catholics were thereafter openly blamed as traitors.

Subsequent persecutions followed: Gee-hae (the name of the year 1839) Persecution, in which 54 were beheaded, over 60 died in prison, and about 50 denied their faith and were released, and Byung-o (1846) Persecution. The number of the martyred were total of 1,133; 692 of these deaths took place between 1784 and 1801, and the balance were between 1802 and 1846. Later, the Byung -in (1866) Persecution claimed somewhere between 8,000 and over 20,000 Catholics' lives during a time period of only eight years.

All these repeated persecutions had eventually strengthening effect to the Korean Catholicism, and produced resulted in many being nominated for sainthood in Korea. In fact, Korea is the country with the most saints in the world.

Regarding this English version Encounter, I was forced during my reading of the book to think about the art of translation, and some of my thoughts were as follows.

The novel starts with a death scene of Hyejang, Tasan's friend in his exile, an accomplished monk and scholar. Writer Han depicts the death as ugly and hideous as possible to show the reader the horror of death. Death was the very reason that Tasan ended up betraying his fellow believers and his own faith. For that matter it is very important scene for the entire novel. In the middle of page 4, the translator states, "His (death) was no calm passing into the realm of quiescence. "Gruesome" was the only word to describe the death scene: eyes wide open, teeth grinding, fist"

"Gruesome" was the only word to describe the death scene, was not found in the Korean text. The writer simply records how Tasan observes the scene without either of them

editorializing. Was this insertion necessary? One such instance might be considered a trivial matter not worth taking issue with, however, I have seen other similar editorializations, added seemingly unnecessarily, elsewhere in the book.

Two paragraphs down on the same page, “For two nights Hyejang lay dying. The monks, now weary from chanting, ceaselessly repeated the sutra for the dying as though hastening his demise. In spite of the cruel pain of the death throes, the end itself came with astonishing ease. It was past midnight and the bright moon rode serene in the crystalline sky.”

In the original, this was in two paragraphs. The third sentence was the start of the second paragraph. The second paragraph contains in the original a description of how Hyejang dies, which the translator completely left out. Considering how important this scene is and how the death throes culminate at its end, it should not have been edited. I have also seen more deletions elsewhere in the translation.

The first paragraph on the same page reads, “Beyond the thick forest of camellia, pine, and nutmeg...” The nutmeg the translator is referring to here is the bee-ja tree in Korean, and it is *torreya* nut tree, with balsam-like, needle leaves. Nutmeg has round leaves and a tropical evergreen tree grown in Indonesia. Korea is not in the tropics.

On page 68 there is a scene of Catholic women and their daughters fleeing, with the assistance of their servant Nak-chong, who had been a baptized Catholic, as Pius. Nak-chong rough-talks to the young girls, and when scolded and corrected by the accompanying nurse-maid, he utters, “....They are only the bitches of a Catholic....” The Korean text is closer translated as “....They are only heretics’ litters....” The word “Catholic” may be inappropriately used here, since it does not convey to English speaking readers the meaning of “heretics” as used in the Korean text (in fact, it may convey the opposite meaning than what was intended).

In the original there are numbered sections under each titled chapters. The translation eliminated all the numbered divisions. Items added to the translation not found in the original are: a 19th century Korean map by cartographer Jung-ho Kim; Foreword: Saints, Sages, and the Novelist’s Art by Don Baker, a list of the Principal Characters in Encounter, a map showing the Eight Provinces of the Yi Dynasty. Even though I agree that the second map might offer the English speaking readers some sense of orientation, I cannot quite comprehend the wisdom of adding the other map. It should be remembered that Mannam is not a historical work, but a literary work.

With all the translator’s license exercised in the Encounter, it still reads very well and the translator’s English is in most part very eloquent. My personal sentiment is that someone who translates the works of, say, Kazantzakis’, would not have been accepted by the literary world with much credibility with so much liberty, justifiable or not, that this translator took in Encounter.

Historical data are taken from A History of Korean Church, vol. I (16 C.- 1918) written by the Institute of Korean Church History Studies, Seoul, Korea 1989.