

Confronting Empires: Manhae's Understanding of Buddhism

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Abstract

This paper outlines some key ideas of the twentieth-century Buddhist monk Han Yong-un, or Manhae. It focuses in particular on Manhae's social engagement under the Japanese occupation. It underlines the role played by Manhae's doctrine in reviving a national sentiment and culture in Korea. It elaborates on his doctrine of the Loved one, or *nim*, sketches the mutual influences of Buddhism and Confucianism in his thought, and builds on his critique of imperialism, militarism, and Korean "self-ruination."

Below a mountain, in a hut with a few apricot trees, there is a monk meditating. All these are surrounded by three circles, the first circle is white snow, cold wind, or perhaps warm light. The next circle is everyday life, war, ideology, revolution, and so on, and the last, most vigorous, is the exercise of power of the strong and the creditors. The sun has set. With everything now a fading shadow, this year's sun has set.

(Han, 1980, 1: 89)

The above poem, "Semo" (The Year is Setting), was penned in the 1930s by Manhae (1879–1944), Han Yong-un by his real name, when he was over 50 years old. It tersely expresses the sentiments of his time. Multiple concentric circles surround the person meditating in a small hut next to an apricot tree, which lies at the foot of a mountain. White snow, cold wind, and warm light form the first circle; with everyday life, war, ideology, and revolution forming the second. The third circle is that of the strong and the creditors, that is, the rich. Manhae here expresses his bitter feelings about the assertion of authority by the strong and the rich. The poem insinuates that the meditating monk has not freed himself from his historical and political reality – the worldly and the otherworldly remain connected. Aware of this connection, Manhae resided chiefly in Seoul, and was deeply affected by the powerful forces around him and the trends of history, and sought to respond to them.

In this article, I would like to show the way in which Buddhist teachings have adapted themselves to the age of Empire, which, with its sheer exercise of power, trampled on life, freedom, independence, and human rights. Buddhism is often characterized as an otherworldly religion, and

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what we see in Manhae during the beginning of the last century contradicts this. Manhae seems well aware of both the core Mahāyāna teachings, and the power of the strong and the rich. Born in Korea, where Confucianism had been deeply rooted in the everyday life of the Korean people, he, as a Buddhist, struggled hard in order to properly respond to what he perceived as the demands of his age. Manhae's understanding of Buddhism is still so influential in Korea that it often becomes a yardstick with which otherworldly ascetic Korean Buddhists are gauged. Most significantly, his concept of the bodhisattva spirit, resonant with political overtones, has had a strong influence on secular intellectuals, in particular on those who fought for democracy against authoritarian regimes during the 1970s. The issues he dealt with and his solutions are not simply a thing of the past, but still relevant today. They remain relevant, inasmuch as Buddhism continues to teach life and freedom, and the strong and the rich incessantly violate the weak and the poor. I have divided this article into nine short sections in the hope that these divisions will make it easier to organize his life and thought around the most salient points.

Life and historical background: Japanese occupation

In the current view of Korean history, the late-nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century are seen as an onerous period of Japanese colonial oppression. Likewise, for Manhae, this period represented the seizure of national identity, dignity, and purity; a period when gold and the sword ruled; a time when life, freedom, independence, and peace gave way to death, restraint, submission, and struggle. The loss of the Korean people's freedom and independence is the primary background against which we should understand Manhae.

The secondary background for our understanding of Manhae is the invasion of Japanese Buddhism. Korean Buddhism at the onset of the twentieth century had already been severely diminished through 500 years of oppression under the Chosŏn dynasty's anti-Buddhism/pro-Confucianism policies. With little influence on society, Korean Buddhism had barely been able to survive. Manhae perceived that the Chosŏn's Confucian ideology, and the restrictions on the practice of Buddhism which had been enacted by some of the era's kings (particularly after the late fifteenth century), had led to Buddhism's fragile existence in the remote mountains (Han, 1980, 2: 216). Temples could not be built near towns, and monks were not permitted to enter the capital. Despised as the lowest stratum of society, monks were strictly forbidden from establishing any organizations, and from engaging in missionary activities. Buddhism survived mainly as a private faith, amalgamated with Shamanism, Taoism, and folk beliefs.

But the invasion of Japanese Buddhism was a threat more dire than half a millennium of official neglect. That invasion, from 1870 to the proclamation of the 1911 ordinance regarding Korean monasteries, consisted of two stages: 1) laying the groundwork for the assimilation of Korean Buddhism, and 2) Japanese solidification of their control over Korean Buddhism. One of the most important consequences of the invasion of Japanese Buddhism was the appearance of married monks, and their rise to power. Korean Buddhism had traditionally been centered around celibate monks and nuns.

As the varied pattern of Manhae's life suggests, rather than a traditional Sŏn master, he was a poet, a monk, a reformer and a freedom fighter. He was one of the leaders of the March 1st Movement and a signer of the 1919 Declaration of Independence. Among Buddhist figures who appeared in the last one hundred and fifty years, he, more than anyone, was highly sensitive to the fate of the Korean people. From the age of 18, Manhae's life was unique for a monk. He had children, but was not a dutiful father, and his choice of a monastic career was not motivated solely by a quest for the answer to the problem of life and death. He placed more importance on the life, freedom, and independence of his people than on enlightenment, dharma lineage, sŏn meditative

experience, or otherworldly asceticism. Instead of residing in a clean, quiet mountain hermitage, he spent most of his time in the dusty city of Seoul, breathing in the atmosphere of the era, deeply involved in its political and social issues. He sought to live a fully engaged life, a life which confronted the problems of his place and his time, rather than a life which avoided them.

“Why did i become a monk?” – the influence of Confucianism

The Confucian tradition considerably influenced Manhae’s understanding and practice of Buddhism. This is evident in “Why Did I Become a Monk?” (나는 왜 중이 되었나), a simple piece containing Manhae’s reflections, written in 1930. The text begins with a series of questions and answers about Manhae’s motivations for entering the monastic life. “Why did I become a monk? Did this country and society, in which I was born, prevent me from becoming anything but a monk? Or did all the suffering – the birth, aging, sickness, and death of the human realm – drive me into the monastic quarters, making eternal life and renunciation of desire sprout within me?” (Han, 1980, 1: 410).

The difference between these two alternatives presented here is full of significance. If Manhae became a monk because of the situation of his country, then he became a monk due to secular issues, and his motive could be called Confucian in a Korean context. If, on the other hand, he entered the monastic life in order to be free from all sufferings that arise from birth, aging, sickness, and death; if he had wanted to obtain eternal life and renounce desires, then he could be said to have had a Buddhist motivation. However, even after reading the tail end of Manhae’s reflections on this topic, a reader does not receive a definitive answer. With all things taken into consideration, his motivations were both Confucian and Buddhist.

Manhae’s reflections end with these words:

What have I obtained in my 30 years as a monk? [...] Paying reverence to the Buddha in the Main Hall in An’guk-dong, as evening falls, I feel that I have at last obtained eternal life. Some day, when the body has disappeared with the universe, not even a remote trace will remain. Yet I feel that my mind is in endless comfort and at peace. Even so, shall I as a man finish my life as a monk? Isn’t there a political forum in front of us? Didn’t I become a monk because no such forum existed? (Han, 1980, 1: 412)

Manhae said that eternal life and endless comfort could be obtained even within destitution and struggle. The questions in both his opening and concluding remarks, in which he wonders if he became a monk because of the lack of a political forum, must not be seen as his intentional avoidance of an answer. In fact, it seems to indicate that Manhae’s life was formed from the dual impulses of personal salvation and salvation of the world. Furthermore, his understanding and practice of Buddhism was sustained by opposing, yet non-dual concepts: the absolute and the relative, the infinite and the finite, the sacred and the secular, personal salvation and general salvation, traditional Buddhism and the Confucian spirit, wisdom and skillful means, and religious being and historical being.

Imperialism: an age of destitution

He perceived that his time was not a time of satisfaction, self-sufficiency, and fullness, but was, on the contrary, a time of crisis, injustice, and destitution; a time bereft of righteousness, freedom, equality, and human rights; and a period under the tyranny of demons and enemies equipped with gold and swords. While recognizing the relative value of history, Manhae saw history as taking place within the realm of cause and effect (a realm in which the karma of good and evil had

potency) and his era therefore called for patience and a struggle for good. Manhae believed that not only the Korean people, but even Korean Buddhism, faced a critical situation. Therefore, he lamented that calls for reform had still to be heard (Han, 1980, 2: 182).

His sense of deprivation is clearly expressed in his poem “I Saw You” (당신을 보았습니다) which appears in *The Silence of Love*, published in 1926, fifteen years after the Japanese occupation began:

I cannot forget you since you are gone.

But I have you in my mind for my sake rather than for your sake.

As I have no soil to cultivate, I have nothing to eat.

When I made a call to the next door just to borrow some millet or potato for my dinner, my neighbor said, “A beggar has no personality. The one with no personality has no life. It is a crime to help you.”

On my way out after hearing these words, I saw you in my tears.

I have no house to live in. And, for this and other reasons, I have no family register to show others.

A general once said, “The one with no family register can’t claim to be a human. How can you, the one who can’t be a human, say you prize chastity?,” and then he tried to rape me.

I repelled him and, at the moment of my anger against others turning into a sorrow, I saw you.

Ah, I thought all the ethics, morals, and laws were just the streaks of smoke arising from the altar dedicated to the sword and the gold.

While I was hesitating to accept the eternity’s love, to write down the first page of human history with ink, or to drink wine, I saw you. (Han, 1980, 1: 57–58; Kim, 2005: 89–90)

The things listed in this poem are as follows: soil, harvest, food, personality, life, family register, national identity, human rights, and chastity. Each one of them was a necessity for life, but had been taken away by a general, who was a willing tool of imperialism. Imperialism in human history often employs gold and swords. But it also has ethics, morality, and laws on its side in order to justify oppressive colonial rule. As far as the poet is concerned, all these three are in vain, like a streak of smoke, because he sees that taking away basic rights is never justifiable. But the speaker of the poem, clearly a woman, is too weak to reclaim all her losses, thus her anger turns into sorrow.

Let us see how his sense of the age is revealed in the essay, “Writing on Korean Independence” (조선독립의 서, 朝鮮獨立의 書), which Manhae composed in prison, in 1920, and submitted to a Japanese prosecutor:

For better or for worse, nationalism has been spreading across the entire globe since the eighteenth century. Within this turmoil, imperialism has reared its head, and given birth to militarism, and the so-called theory of survival of the fittest and laws of the jungle have come to be regarded as perennial truths. Thus, a day doesn’t pass when wars of death and usurpation do not take place among nations and peoples. It has reached the point that there is probably nowhere in this world where nations, boasting thousands of years of history, are not reduced to a pile of ashes and thousands of lives are not sacrificed. The representative militaristic nations are Germany in the West, and Japan in the East. (Han, 1980, 1: 346)

Manhae states that nationalism and imperialism have become prominent after the eighteenth century, and that militarism evolved as a result of imperialism. These ideologies took the survival of the fittest and the law of the jungle as unchanging truths. Manhae, however, does not embrace these ideologies. In the same essay, when discussing the allies' victory over the Germans in World War I, he describes it as "the victory of righteousness (正義) and humanity (人道), the failure of militarism (軍國主義)." (Han, 1980, 1: 348). But he does not call it the allies' victory per se, because the allies have also employed "war ships and canons," that is, tools of killing, thus they are half-militaristic (Han, 1980, 1: 347).

Manhae only partially accepted social Darwinism. Social Darwinism premises the survival of the fittest, and thus was part of the philosophical undercurrent in the self-strengthening movements so popular in Korea during the early twentieth century. These Manhae supported. However, he was totally at odds with those who regarded imperialist Japan's domination of Korea as being natural (most of the Japanese colonialists, and some Koreans, had taken this position). He could not regard strength as righteousness (Han, 1980, 2: 38–40).¹ Such ideologies ran counter to his Buddhist understanding of Mind, True Thusness (眞如), and Buddhahood.

The loved one: *Nim*

If something was forcibly taken away by others, Manhae argues, you should not yield, but yearn, and fight for it. That is the calling of life. For Manhae, a life often characterized by freedom, peace, and equality, is also a life of resistance. The freedom that life bestows upon us is absolute and omnipotent. As such, whenever it is oppressed by any authority or power, be they kings or emperors, one is compelled to resist. In his "Ode to a blade of grass" (一莖草, 일경초, 1918), Manhae writes:

Though it may be evil itself, how can you stop it? The life force sprouting from the grass may cut through stone in the waste land. How lovely! The life of a single blade of grass, which even the axes of ghosts and the teeth of demons are unable to harm. (Han, 1980, 2: 349)

Looking deep into himself and his people, Manhae sought to confirm the enduring vitality epitomized by this single blade of grass, a life force impervious to even the axes of ghosts and the teeth of demons. In Manhae's thought, life is not only the object of yearning, but it is itself the source of vitality for that yearning.

In "Complaint", the preface to *The Silence of Love*, Manhae writes: "*Nim* is everything yearned for" (Han, 1980, 1: 42; Lee, 1980: 7). *Nim* is often translated as the beloved, the loved one, or my love. Manhae must have cherished sentient beings, fatherland, independence for his people, and, above all else, life itself.

According to numerous poetic imageries of *nim* in *The Silence of Love*, *nim* is not an abstract principle. If you call someone or something *nim*, it immediately turns into an intimate, beautiful, and thus lovable object to you. Though invisible, it is perceived; though intangible, it is felt; and it is an entity which one can engage in conversation. It is a concrete personality which can be endearingly addressed. *Nim* bestows on me the memory of a kiss. When lovers fight with flowers, *nim* repeatedly acquiesces. *Nim* scolds, yet one can stay within *nim*'s bosom. Most importantly, if one gives one's small life to *nim*, *nim* embraces one tightly and stays with one always. However, since *nim* is gone, observing silence, one has no choice but to ardently wait for *nim*. Although *nim* gives one a life of eternal brightness, *nim* can also rob one of one's physical life. We find the following lines:

Oh *nim*, you like spring, brightness, and peace.

May you become a bodhisattva of compassion, shedding tears upon the bosoms of the weak.

Oh *nim*, oh my love, oh spring wind upon a sea of ice. (Han, 1980, 1: 64)

As seen here, *nim* is a bodhisattva of compassion who cherishes brightness and peace. *Nim* sheds tears of sadness for the weak, who have been robbed of their right and peace. Asking *nim* to become a bodhisattva, one inevitably follows *nim*, becoming a bodhisattva of compassion too.

Mind (心), True Thusness (眞如) and Buddhahood (佛性): the wellspring for criticizing imperialism

When Manhae issues his criticisms of imperialism and militarism, from what philosophical tradition does he come? According to *On Revitalizing Korean Buddhism* (佛敎維新論, 불교유신론), Manhae based his critique in Mind, “True Thusness,” and Buddhahood; all of these principles are what the Buddha taught (Han, 1980, 2: 37, 40, 43). Then, he goes on to argue two -isms of Buddhism:

Sentient beings are confused by unequal and false phenomena, and not enlightened; thus our Lord Buddha, out of compassion, showed and taught the truth of equality. Thus a sūtra says that all sentient beings are the same, not different from each other in mind and body; another sūtra says that both beings with Buddhahood, and beings without Buddhahood, realize the Buddha’s way alike. This sermon is very deep and wide in the truth of equality, and penetrates everything without remainder. How ultimately different it is from an unequal viewpoint! We may say that from this truth of equality, in fact, modern liberalism (自由主義) and cosmopolitanism (世界主義) come. (Han, 1980, 2: 44)

It is needless to say that success, life, and strength are totally different phenomena from failure, death, and weakness; but they are all the same from the perspective of ultimate truth, as Manhae perceives it. According to him, the reason why the Buddha preached the truth of equality was to overthrow the inequality of phenomena, and the prejudice which supported that inequality.

Manhae seems to think that when the truth of equality is applied to an individual, it becomes liberalism; when it is applied to a group or a people, it becomes cosmopolitanism. Each and every human is the same and equal; when one’s freedom infringes others’ freedom, then it will violate the truth of equality (Han, 1980 2: 44–45). Manhae explains cosmopolitanism in terms of one family and brotherhood:

If there is no talk of my nation and other’s nation, this state and that state, this race and that race, and if we are all seen as one family (一家), and as brothers, there would be no competitiveness and no invasions. Governing the world would be like governing a household. (Han, 1980 2: 45)

Manhae read history as showing that when nations compete with one another, the stronger one wins, and pillages the weaker; then, the first one becomes an imperialist, and takes itself as the center of the world. But Manhae’s “one family” has no center. Simply put, the ultimate bases for his criticism of imperialism – and his advocacy of egalitarianism, liberalism, and cosmopolitanism – are Mind, True Thusness, and Buddhahood.

The *Vimalakīrti Sūtra* and the Bodhisattva Spirit

Manhae was so fond of reading the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra*, a Mahāyāna Buddhist sūtra, that he even left his own comments on it. Influential in East Asian Buddhism, especially among laypeople, this *Sūtra* teaches, among other subjects, the meaning of emptiness and nonduality.

From this *Sūtra*, Manhae seemed to learn that nonduality lies between the transcendent and the secular, the Bodhisattva Spirit and an awareness of his times. Nay, it is quite possible that he may have found in this *Sūtra* a confirmation of the truths which he had already realized. On a passage from the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra*, Manhae comments:

The pursuit of appropriate pleasures in meditation, so as to avoid the suffering involved in saving sentient beings, is nothing less than the bodhisattva's confinement. Salvation for a bodhisattva is going in and out of the round of rebirths, saving sentient beings through skilful means. (Han, 1980, 3: 310)

On another passage, one dealing with the dual possession of wisdom and skillful means, Manhae taught: "To remain in the round of rebirth and to save sentient beings, yet not to be permanently annihilated in nirvana, is a skilful means of salvation" (Han, 1980, 3: 312). In this manner, not being annihilated in nirvana, but remaining in this world using skillful means for salvation, is, for Manhae, the dual possession of wisdom and skillful means. And in his comments on another passage in the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra*, Manhae describes a bodhisattva as one who "does not fall into non-action in annihilation," and is "unattached to any dharma, and acts in accordance with the times so as to save sentient beings" (Han, 1980, 3: 314). For Manhae, nirvana, meditation, wisdom, skillful means, and "acting in accordance with the times," are all not for oneself, but for saving sentient beings.

In a very short treatise, "Association for the Revitalization of Buddhism – The Need for Buddhist Self-government and New Activities" (佛敎維新會 – 佛敎의 自治와 新活動의 필요, 불교유신회-불교의 자치와 신활동의 필요),² Manhae discusses the purpose of religion. As he argues it, although the purpose of religion appears to be transcending this dirty world, achieving paradise after departure from this world, and maintaining detachment from daily life; it is actually aimed at "Heaven within this world and a new life within this life (人生)" (Han, 1980, 2: 132). Buddhism's ultimate objective is neither "tasting" the dharma in the remote mountains nor transcending life so as to become an enlightened person. Religion's purpose should be to lead us to be a true person with a true life, living true daily lives within this world. In short, realizing that the absolute is connected to the relative, we must realize "infinite life within this finite, dirty world" (Han, 1980, 2: 132).

In the same treatise, Manhae tried to summarize the purpose of religion by making a distinction between a "luminous life" (光明的 生命) and a "secular life" (世俗的 生命). From the viewpoint of a luminous life, the wealth and glory of this world have only relative value. Here, life does not refer to an empty state of annihilation. On the contrary, like a cup running over, it has an aspect that is replete in itself but highly applicable to our daily lives. To the degree in which the social systems, laws, and morality of the age are in accordance with this plenitude and this superb applicability, then they resonate with the absolute and take on added significance and even spiritual importance. One serious problem for the contemplative aesthetic is that these social systems, laws, and morality, instead of being constant and perfect expressions of a luminous life, are temporal, relative expressions, often riddled with corruption. The absolute, as that which must function within the world's systems and laws, cannot be annihilation. At the same time, the transcendent nature of the absolute should be recognized in the way in which it transcends temporal laws, systems, and hierarchies (Han, 1980, 2: 132–133).

Manhae's view of self-ruination

One of the most urgent questions for Manhae – a person who deeply wanted to "act in accordance with his times" – was the following one: "Why was Korea taken over by Japan?" This question was painful but unavoidable to many nationalistic Koreans in the early twentieth century. Most of the

post-independence Korean historians have blamed Japanese imperialists. But Manhae forcefully argued that Korea fell to ruin by itself, even before Japan penetrated Korea. For Manhae, it is an eternal truth that invasion comes only after self-ruination. He argues:

Looking back at all antiquity, there was no country which was defeated by others before it fell by itself and there was no individual who was humiliated by others before one humiliated oneself [...] I am not saying that the grudge about the country's downfall is not deep; but one cannot resolve that grudge only by resenting conquering nations. Lamenting our misfortune is not a small thing, but those who only resent lucky ones cannot easily undo the misfortune [...] Even though conquering nations ruin themselves and lucky ones eventually become miserable, the second and the third conquering nations will emerge again unless the causes of our downfall are removed. One will not be completely free from an unhappy situation unless the cause of one's unhappiness is removed. (Han, 1980, 1: 210–211)

This “Reflection” was written in 1931, twenty years after Japan's annexation of Korea in 1910. For Manhae, reflection literally means to search for what is wrong with us, not with them. Why did we lose our nation to Japan? His answer is loud and clear in that it's our fault. According to the record of his trial reported by the *Dong-a Ilbo* (동아일보), a daily newspaper, on September 25, 1930, Manhae mentioned two causes for the weakening of Korea: the political corruption of the Chosŏn dynasty for several centuries, and recalcitrance in the adoption of modern civilization (ibid: 373). These two causes combined made the country weaker, vulnerable to the Japanese Empire.

Manhae's theory of self-ruination is basically future oriented, since we are able to find ways to prepare for future aggression by identifying causes in us for the loss of our nation. If Manhae's reflection is valid, many Korean historians should rewrite history books, devoting more pages to explain what went wrong with us, and only then should they point out the role played by foreign aggression.

Fondness for power and martialism

Manhae often used the term “power” (勢力) as something which is necessary to rule a country, to run a temple, or to protect a woman's chastity. This power may refer to collective power; to political, economic, military, and even administrative power put together. In the Korean language, the term “power” traditionally refers to physical power, measurable in numbers and dimensions. His attitude towards this power was dualistic. While denouncing barbarian civilization as unethical and unreligious, in which power overwhelms the truth and cannons trounce the public law (Han, 1980, 2: 60), Manhae maintained that Buddhism, too, should nurture power to confront such a civilization (Han, 1980, 2: 61). Though the prevalence of the law of the jungle is a principal aspect of barbarian civilization, he pointed out: “there is no denying the laws of nature” (Han, 1980, 2: 60). Regarding power, he stated: “Power is the deity to protect freedom. Once power is broken, freedom too is lost and the consequence will resemble a living death” (Han, 1980, 2: 63). He would certainly welcome the pursuit of wealth and power unless it infringes another's life and liberty.

Manhae's favorable attitude toward power is vividly evident in his conception of good and evil. Good is not limited to a passive attitude of unconditional submission; rather it is exemplified by a strong and triumphant person who protects others and nurtures all things. Evil, however, “lies not only in assaulting others and destroying their properties without due reasons. Greater evil consists in becoming a weak and defeated person, pitied by others and slaving for material gains” (Han 1980, 1: 269). To Manhae, it was the greater evil to meekly suffer from others' violence than to commit an act of violence against others.

Thus, it is not illogical for Manhae to have had a high regard for martialism or military spirit. Manhae was well versed in Korean history, and he saw that history as one which compelled the Korean people to seek out generals who were capable of repelling Korea's enemies, enemies who would otherwise humiliate, molest, and rape. He repeatedly shows his admiration for men, warriors, and courage. In a *sijo*, a Korean traditional three-verse style poem entitled "A Man," Manhae regards highly a person skilled in both "*mun*" (文) and "*mu*" (武), literary and martial arts:

What should I do, as a man? Do I have to sell the farm to buy books, or to close a page of a book to sharpen a sword; It may be true that a man should both read and gird on a sword. (ibid.: 96)

In another poem, one with no title, Manhae wrote as follows:

Having Yi Sun-sin as a ferry man, having Eulji Mundeok as a horseman
Taking up highly the Evil-destroyer Sword, let me travel constantly north and south
Perhaps this is the only way to search for my beloved (*nim*). (ibid.: 97)

It was in the 1930s that Manhae penned this poem, but it appears that Manhae had long cherished those two generals, who often number among the greatest heroes in Korean history: the admiral Yi Sun-sin who repelled a Japanese invasion in the sixteenth century, and Eulji Mundeok, a noted military leader of the early seventh-century Goguryeo kingdom (one of the Three Kingdoms of Korea), who expelled the aggression of the Sui, a dynasty of China. Even today, Korean textbooks teach about both of these heroes to students in elementary and secondary schools.

Manhae's views of progress and civilization

Though Manhae occasionally used the term "civilization," his discussions on the subject were sporadic and fragmentary. But he positively accepted, albeit with provisional clauses, the features of modern materialistic civilization seen in Seoul at the time, including trains, motorcars, electricity, etc. He strongly resisted and challenged Japanese imperialism, but never claimed that Japanese imperialism had its roots in modern civilization. Manhae's favorable attitude toward materialistic civilization is deeply related to his belief that a nation, Buddhist groups, and individuals should have sufficient power to protect themselves against barbarian invaders. His support for allowing Buddhist monks to be married is also at least partially grounded in his conviction that truth cannot prevail without a power strong enough to preserve the truth. Manhae would not have declared that, "Korea is being ground down, not under the Japanese heel, but under that of modern civilization," echoing Gandhi's well-known remark: "India is being ground down, not under the English heel, but under that of modern civilization" (Huh, 2000: 110–111).

In one place, though, Manhae showed some reservation as to Western civilization. He likened Western materialistic civilization to a passenger train, and mental self-cultivation to the track on which the train travelled. Accordingly, his view of civilization has been described as an advocacy for "Eastern ways and Western instruments" (Huh, 2001: 114).

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Manhae criticized monks who went on mountain retreats, who cut themselves off from the world, and regarded them as pessimistic and self-righteous. Rather than being concerned with the depth or purity of enlightenment and lineages of dharma, Manhae focused on the salvation of the Korean people. He was able to link some of the vows of the Buddha and bodhisattvas to save sentient beings with the political and historical fate of his people. Being an advocate of a people's

Buddhism, he struggled against Japanese occupation, portraying it as a demonic force that had employed the power of gold and swords. He not only endowed the concept of Buddhist compassion with great significance, but also expanded its scope to include historical and political acts.

For Manhae, Mind was the source of life. He had a religious or ethical hope that the luminosity of life should be manifested through various systems, institutions, and laws within history. Although his view of history was not devoid of an aspect of futility, Manhae firmly believed in the law of cause and effect; this firm belief enabled him to participate in history, where the demon of gold and swords reared its head. But the place where this demon is lodged is exactly the place most in need of eternal love and great liberation. In his frantic struggle to save the people from oppressive forces, Manhae deemed Buddhist and Confucian tradition, poetry, novels, and magazines as effective means. Was Manhae convinced that, although there was no guarantee of success in his struggle, an all-out effort brought with it eternal life and endless comfort, that is, salvation?

Almost seventy years have passed since Manhae died. South Korea at least has become an independent nation, mainly due to American power; and her citizens, under the contemporary democratic rule, are “greatly” enjoying liberty, freedom, and human rights; “greatly,” beyond the imagination of those people who suffered under Japanese colonialism. And considering the Constitution of the Republic of Korea, under which the state has proclaimed the duty to protect the human life and property of each and every citizen, one may argue that Manhae’s dreams for liberty, equality, and happiness have been to some extent fulfilled.

While the geopolitical situation in East Asia has in some respects radically changed since Manhae’s time, some aspects remain comparable. Korea is still in a challenging setting, surrounded by America, China, Russia, and Japan, in addition to the division of North and South.³ There is still an ongoing territorial dispute between Korea and Japan over Dokdo/Takeshima. All these five nations, including South Korea, are enthralled by “gold and swords,” and are at least half militaristic. Invoking Manhae’s martial leanings, is it necessary for a country such as Korea to produce strong generals, equipped with sufficient power to repel any and all potential enemies, in possession of far-sighted strategic wisdom, and capable of using efficient tactics to follow that strategy? At the same time, protecting the nation with compassion toward others? And must this situation persist until the luminosity of life is fully realized in human history?

Manhae had a favorable view about modern civilization. But if he were today to observe the uncontrollably flourishing material culture, consumerism, and the intense competition to acquire an endless stream of material possessions, he might well reassess his favorable view of modern civilization, and admonish us to do more in the realm of mind cultivation, in order to realize our Buddhahood. His sense of freedom, deeply connected with the luminosity of life, makes us reconsider the conception of freedom in a liberal democratic society, one inseparably connected to capitalism, an economic system which tends to unduly exploit human desires for material possessions.

Author Note

This article partially draws upon my previous three articles on Manhae: Huh 2000, 2001, and 2012.

Notes

1. His understanding of the social Darwinism of the times was influenced by the progressive thoughts of the Chinese scholar and reformist, Liang Qichao (1873–1929). Manhae read him and there are many direct references to Liang Qichao in his work.
2. The source and publication year of this treatise are unavailable. However, examination of the text reveals that it is most likely to be in the 1930s.
3. There has been a certain renaissance of studies on Manhae, especially among literary circles and lay Buddhist scholars. I am not, however, sure what the renaissance has to do with the geopolitical situation.

As a part of the renaissance, in 1962, an award was presented in his honor commemorating his meritorious achievement in establishing the Republic of Korea. This was followed by the erection of a bronze statue in Hongsŏng, and the establishment of the Manhae Hakhoe in 1991. In 1992, a monument inscribed with Manhae's poem was erected at Baekdamsa temple. Since the 1990s, a celibate monks' organization, known as the Sŏnu Toryang, has strived to understand and uphold his ideas. "The Society for Propagation and Practice of Manhae's Thoughts" has been organized since 1996 at Baekdamsa-Temple, and the Society publishes two influential journals, holds the Manhae Festival each year, and has established the Manhae Prize in memory of him. Each Manhae Festival receives support from many other organizations, such as Gangwondo-province, newspaper publishing companies, and various Literary Men's societies. A central government agency and a few Buddhist temples also join the festival.

Far more importantly, at least from the standpoint of Korean academia, his thought and his work have become a favorite subject for study. According to the general catalogue attached to *The Manhae Festival 2012*, for the last half century, over forty PhD dissertations and more than sixty master's theses have been written on him. And about thirty books, including works written in English, have been published (Manhae Village, 2012: 668–710). Most of these articles and books are literary works.

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