Propriety and Women in the 18th Century Korean Novel: *Wanwolhoemaengyøn*

Jung Byung-sul

In this article, I concentrated on the ethical dimensions of the Korean classical novel *Wanwolhoemaengyŏn* (18th century) in such a way as to take into account Korean approaches to the interrelationship of ethics and literature. In particular, I drew attention to the role of women as both the consumers and producers of indigenous fiction in Korea.

My research explores the manner in which the normative concept of "ye" (禮), propriety, served as a core motif in the development of Korean narrative throughout the eighteenth century. In the Korean literary tradition, writers developed elaborate plots in which the resolution of interpersonal conflicts by means of the creative interpretation of Confucian rules of propriety served as a mimetic structure for describing the personalities of individual characters. Those individual characters, in turn, were meant to serve as archetypes by which readers might model their own actions. Thus Korean narrative developed rich literary patterns, all the while never shedding its social function as a means of moral instruction, or straying too far from the central concern of the era, the interpretation of the Confucian classics.

The underlying schemata of pre-modern Korean fiction remain remarkably consistent with the ethical demands made of it by Chosŏn period society as a whole. Values derived from the Confucian ethical canon such as regulated personal relations, hierarchy, filial piety, and family continuity are explored in infinite permutations in Korean narrative in a remarkable blend of dogmatism and literary sensibility. Song Confucianism carried out a regulating function on literary patterning in the Chosŏn period analogous to that which nationalism (in South Korea) or Marxism (in North Korea) later played in the novel during the twentieth century.

Keywords: Wanwolhoemaengyŏn, Okwonchaehapkiyŏn, Korean Novel, Korean Classical Novel, Propriety

The Review of Korean Studies Vol. 5, No. 1 (191-213)

The first female novelist in Korea and *Wanwolhoemaengyŏn*

Wanwolhoemaengyŏn (The Banquet of Betrothal at the Moon-Viewing Pavilion) is by far the longest and most complex novel in the Korean narrative tradition. The sophistication of its literary style and formal complexity of its plot make it a rival of such other masterpieces of the East Asian tradition as *Hongloumeng* (the Dream of the Red Chamber) or the *Tale of Genji* (*Genji monogatari*). Equally significant is the fact that although the literary tradition was almost exclusively limited to men, *Wanwolhoemaengyŏn* is a masterwork in the Korean language and may very well be the composition of a woman, Chŏnju Yi-ssi (1694-1743) (Jung Byung-sul 1998a: 171-222). Moreover, although *Wanwolhoemaengyŏn* is full of allusions to the rich Chinese and Korean literary traditions and is the mature work of a thoughtful author, the author chose to write it entirely in Korean without the use of a single Chinese character. Considering that literary writing was defined by literary Chinese during the Chosŏn period, the narrative of 180 volumes by a woman in the late Chosŏn period in the native Han'gŭl script was a revolutionary development.

Chŏnju Yi-ssi grew up in a family of the most educated and politically successful gentry families. From childhood she was most likely trained in the Chinese classics as were her brothers. Contemporaries describe her as "having the manner of a female scholar." That is to say she acted in a manner similar to an educated man.

The name Chŏnju Yi-ssi indicates that her actual name was never recorded. Chŏnju refers to her ancestors' hometown location and Yi-ssi is a term meaning simply "a *yangban* woman with the surname Yi." It is remarkably difficult to obtain a concrete sense of the personalities and experiences of women during the Chosŏn Period. Society was centered around men and what records remain concerning women on the periphery are sketchy and brief. The records remaining concerning Chŏnju Yi-ssi consist primarily of a short note written by her son on the back of a memorial inscription for her husband. Thanks to the filial obligation her son felt for her he left behind a 92 character description. The only other information available is a memorial tribute by her elder brother Yi Ch'un-je. If we supplement those two short notes with the fragmentary data available in family genealogies, collected essays from

other yangban families, and the *Chosŏn wangjo sillok*, we can roughly describe her life.

Chŏnju Yi-ssi was born in 1694 to a woman of yangban status, Andong Kwŏn-ssi, and an established official Yi Ŏn-gyŏng. Both were forty-one years of age and already had one son and seven daughters - she was the last child. The Chŏnju Yi family was descended from the ninth son of King Sejong by a concubine, and had a long tradition of public service at the highest levels of government.

Most likely her father had been disappointed that he was not blessed with more sons and invested some of the expectations for a son in Chŏnju Yi-ssi. At the time of her birth, all of Chŏnju Yi-ssi' s sisters had married and left home leaving her alone with her brother Yi Ch' un-je. Her father was constantly employed in a series of high-ranking appointments so she had no wants in her daily life. Her brother dedicated himself to academic study and had passed the civil service exam by the time she married.

The glorious reputation of Chŏnju Yi-ssi' s family is readily apparent from those with whom they had social ties. For example, Cho T' ae-ŏk composed the tomb inscription for her father Yi Ŏn-gyŏng. Cho T' ae-ŏk is also well-known in literary history because he copied down for posterity a preface added to a Korean translation of the Chinese novel *Xizhou yanyi* that his mother had transcribed. His short record gives a good idea of how such novels were read and exchanged among yangban women in the seventeenth century. If the women in his family compound read Chinese novels in translation, then most likely so did those around Chŏnju Yi-ssi, and therein lay part of the inspiration to write an extended fictional narrative.

Memorial inscriptions were a major source of information in formal family history. Thus long novels provided a means of recording (in fictional context) events that could not otherwise be expressed in the genres available.

Although the family that Chŏnju Yi-ssi married into did not have quite the same social status as her own, it was certainly a match in terms of intellectual achievement. Her husband' s grandfather and great-grandfather had served important scholarly roles in the government. Her father-in-law passed the civil service exam in 1705 and eventually served as an official tutor for King Yŏngjo. Her husband and

brother-in-law were also successful in the civil service at a young age, as were her three sons. Chŏnju Yi-ssi grew up in a privileged family, surrounded by the symbols of Confucian scholarship. She had both the incentive and the inspiration for Confucian self-expression, but was limited in the genre of composition to the vernacular Korean novel.

It is quite likely that Chŏnju Yi-ssi read widely in Chinese vernacular fiction, which circulated in translation, as well as the new Korean vernacular novels of the seventeenth century such as *Kuunmong*. She found the potential for an entirely new genre of literature within the models that both Chinese and Korean precedents supplied. Some contemporary Korean records (Jung Byung-sul 1998c: 250-252) suggest that such narrative had developed into a major field by the eighteenth century.

The long Korean pre-modern novel was circulated mostly by hand among a limited number of gentry female readers. The authors of such novels are largely unknown because such narrative had a low status within the literary hierarchy of the time, so much so that few were preserved thus few comments were made on them before the twentieth century. Those editions that survived are inevitably works of the nineteenth century that copy earlier texts. The fact that such novels did not receive comment does not mean that they lacked literary merit or that male intellectuals did not read them, but rather that they were not considered as appropriate subjects for discussion. *Wanwolhoemaengyŏn* did not receive the serious attention of male scholars until the twentieth century and it did not appear in print until the last decade.

Chŏnju Yi-ssi clearly saw her work as an effort to elevate the genre of the Korean novel to the level of high literature. She adopted the pose of the historian, or *sagwan*, in her writing so as to suggest that her writing was akin to proper history, and her status not merely that of an idle story teller. Chŏnju Yi-ssi made use of Sima Qian' s central history *Shiji*, and touches on the more recent *Mingshi* (History of the Ming Dynasty). She also fills the novel with quotes and allusions from the central classics of Confucianism including the *Analects, Mencius, Book of Songs, Book of Changes, Liji, Lienuzhuan*, and *Xiaoxue* (the Lesser Learning). In addition, the contemporary Chinese vernacular novels *Sanguozhiyanyi* and *Shuihuzhuan* are occasionally mentioned.

A sharp division between literary Chinese, the language of educated

men, and vernacular Korean, the language of gentry women and uneducated men, existed through the nineteenth century in Korea and defined a clear linguistic hierarchy. Because literary Chinese held such a central position as a universal language that defined intellectual discourse, many Korean vernacular novels exist in both a Hangŭl script and a literary Chinese version. *Wanwolhoemaengyŏn* stands out because, despite the immense erudition displayed by its author, it exists only in a Han' gŭl script version. The implication of such a sophisticated literary narrative entirely in Hangŭl is that by the early eighteenth century some intellectual space had emerged within the literary hierarchy governing the reading of indigenous Korean writing that allowed for such writings to be taken seriously as literature.

The dominant eighteenth century intellectual Ch' ae Chae-gong notes in his preface to a version of the *Nyŏsasho* (Four Books for Women) that the reading of popular novels had become a major social problem. He complained that women whiled away their days in reading popular novels while neglecting their work (volume 33, *Yŏsasŏsŏ*). Women' s han' gŭl novels expanded beyond the hand-written manuscripts associated with the palace such as *Wanwolhoemaengyŏn* to include new legions of cheap printed editions such as *Chang P' ungun chŏn* and *Sukhyang chŏn* that presented simplistic moral tales.

The Role of Propriety in *Wanwolhoemaengyŏn*

This immense novel in 180 volumes is literally an encyclopedia of late Chosŏn Dynasty culture and language that has not received the attention it deserves. In particular, *Wanwolhoemaengyŏn* presents a subtle and intricate argument on the nature of propriety, or ye in Korean, and its function as the core of human relations. *Ye* consists of a set of ordinances for human interaction that define the proper affections and obligations between inferior and superior within the family, and, by extension, within the state. The regulations and prescriptions of *ye* find their origins in Chinese antiquity but while those models form the basis for human interaction they must be constantly reinterpreted anew for each age.

Ye served as the basis of social interactions within a world-view in

which the structure of the family was assumed as the basis for the structure of society. The debates both at the private and the public level on the proper implication of *ye* come close to what the modern world defines as constitutional law: the constant generation of new ordinances and rules that maintain the spirit, if not the letter, of a classical moral text.

Throughout the Chosŏn period, propriety, or *ye*, was a subject of great interest in Korea both for the individual and for the state from the very founding of the dynasty. Already in the early Chosŏn period *Zhuzi jiali* (Zhu Xi' s Family Rites) spread widely in Korea, and Korean intellectuals established an elaborate series of state rituals that were collected in the compilation *Kukcho olyeŭi*. These texts covered in detail the rituals surrounding the veneration of ancestors, marriage, the reception of officials, military matters, and funerals.

The project of remaking Korea along the lines of an ideal Confucian state received a massive blow in 1592 when the country was subjected to repeated invasions, ordered by the leader of Japan Toyotomi Hideyoshi, that shook Korean society to its roots. Although the invasions were eventually repulsed with Chinese aid, they did immense damage not only to the infrastructure but also to the cultural heritage of Korea. Many of the essential texts of the Confucian and scholarly tradition were destroyed and centers of scholarship dispersed. Among those lost were these basic texts that defined the manner in which state ritual should be performed. As state ritual played a role in Korea close to that of Constitutional law in the United States today, the interruption in the practice of ritual and the loss of the interpretive tradition surrounding it resulted in an immense crisis within the state. As a result of this challenge, the study and preservation of ritual became a central intellectual discourse. General reference books and prescriptions concerning family ritual found their way into every family of means in Korea. They defined the essential basis for human interactions and the resolution of conflict through the twentieth century in the same manner.

In the absence of a strong central government or elaborate military or police systems, building up social order through ritual and propriety was a practical solution to the problems at hand. At the same time, because of the inflexibility of the interpretations surrounding ritual in

such reference books, the articulation of policy through this medium resulted in the formation of political factions divided by issues of interpretation.

Often irresolvable, and often bloody, battles between political factions came to a peak in the Rites Controversies of 1659 and 1674. The central issues in these massive political confrontations were whether the stepmother of the king should wear mourning for one year or for three years after the king's death (1659), and whether the stepmother of the king should wear mourning for nine months or one year after the princess's death (1674). Although this small detail of propriety may seem rather trivial, it resulted in factional purges and deep hostilities that lasted for many generations. The question of whether a consort should wear mourning for one year or for three years was not, however, a simple matter of personal preference or even of respect for the king. The pressing issue behind the mourning period was what the political status of the royal family would be vis-a-vis the rest of society. If the primary consort wore mourning clothes for only one year, she would be adhering to the standards for the people of the country, meaning that her family's status in the Confucian moral universe would be no different from that of ordinary bureaucrats or commoners. They merely occupied a political position of significance. If she wore mourning for three years, however, it would signify that the king was a person of a privileged status among all members of society and that status transcended the political office that he occupied. The problem went beyond the theoretical issue of how ritual should be conducted and extended into the political realm because of its implications as to what the authority of the king would be. The stakes involved in the determination of the relative power of the king were so high that the most determined and unrelenting political factions grew out of it. Successful factions conducted sweeping purges of those with a divergent view on the rites controversies so one's position in these debates determined one's social, political and intellectual identity. *Ye* defined who would have power and how that power could or could not be exercised. Power could only be discussed explicitly within the context of *ye*.

After the seventeenth century, the rites controversies ceased to be an immediate and traumatic issue, but the fascination with ritual and

propriety remained equally intense. Issues involving propriety extended beyond the scholarly or bureaucratic realm and penetrated into family life and daily practice. Perhaps the best illustration of diffusion of ritual practice among the populace at large is the immense popularity of Yi Chae' s *Salye p'yŏnram* (Convenient Guide to the Four Rites). Ritual or propriety became a major focus of interest for all intellectuals.

Chŏnju Yi-ssi wrote *Wanwolhoemaengyŏn* during an age in which political groups and family lines articulated their differences through the interpretation of ritual and for this reason ritual events inevitably carried immense weight. The elaborate discussions and debates among family members concerning proper ritual in *Wanwolhoemaengyŏn* make it abundantly clear that the book' s readers not only possessed a fine command of the details of propriety, but also that their primary fascination in the reading of fiction was observing the manner in which propriety was expressed and problems in ritual were resolved.

The debate over issues of propriety inform almost all aspects of the novel. A representative passage relates the discussion between Chŏng In-sŏng' s adoptive father Chŏng Cham and his natural father Chŏng Sam concerning the assignment of names to Chŏng In-sŏng' s son and Chŏng In-gwang' s (Chŏng In-sŏng' s twin brother) son. Commonly the naming of children was the responsiblity of the grandfather. Chŏng In-sŏng' s son is assigned the formal name Mong-ch' ang and the informal name Chasun, and Chŏng In-gwang' s son is assigned the formal name Mong-ch' ŏn and the informal name Chaha.

Chŏng Cham describes the relationship of the grandsons' names to their fathers. These words are directed at the great grandmother and the mother of Chŏng Cham and Chŏng Sam, Lady Sŏ, and are followed by a running commentary that, not unlike the explanations attached to the Chinese classics, explains the significance of the text.

Master Chŏng Cham responded,

> "As a general rule, names should be given to children in accordance with the five phases.[1] Their father' s name contains the

1. The five phases in Chinese epistemology, water, wood, fire, earth, and metal, are general terms denoting the nature of substances and phenomena.

> metal element, I had the grandsons' name contain the wood element."
>
> *Names should be chosen so that the proper succession is followed from generation to generation. If wood follows metal, however, it will cause a conflict within the harmony of the five phases. That is a mistake.*

The employment of similar Chinese characters as either the first or second part of the personal name of sons became standard practice from the Koryŏ period. Such Chinese characters designated the position of a son with regards to his elder and younger brothers, past and future generations, and the various branches of the larger family. The sequence in which those names were used over the generations was often determined by the order of the five phases (each Chinese character being affiliated with one of the phases). The Chinese character common to the sons of a generation had to be given in the proper sequence of the five phases: water, wood, fire, earth, and metal, so that mutual generation resulted and encouraged prosperity.

The commentary points out correctly, however, that the proper order of the phases has been violated. The grandsons' name should contain the water element, not the wood phase. Such a violation will produce a conflict, an unnatural disadvantage, that will destroy the vitality of the family and jeopardize his well-being. The contemporary reader would have been aware that this decision would determine the direction of the novel' s development. The running commentary affixed to the first quote by Chŏng Cham criticizes him for assigning a name that fails to adhere to the proper order of the five phases and thus spells trouble.

Next Chŏng Sam mentions that the grandchildren' s names were announced at the ancestral shrine after their formal capping ceremony denoting their coming of age. Such a detail appealed to women — and probably men — from *yangban* status families of leisure who took an interest in the most minute issues of propriety and ritual.

Master Chŏng Sam said to his mother,

> "When all the informal names were announced, the first son Mong-ch' ang had received the informal name Chasun and the second son Mong-ch' ŏn had received the informal name Chaha."
>
> *The informal name is not announced at the ancestral shrine. Such foolishness to say so*. (volume 176)

The running commentary affixed to the second quote by Chŏng Sam criticizes the narrator of the novel for writing incorrectly that the informal name is announced to the ancestors. Although this commentator asserts that the informal name is not announced in such a manner, in fact the ritual compendium *Salye p' yŏnram* states that such an announcement could be practiced. The point, however, is to introduce another voice who draws attention to the validity of the narrator.

The most obvious consequence of such an interest on the part of readers is the constant description of daily rituals such as the morning and evening visits to parents and the larger rituals surrounding birth, coming of age, marriage, old age and death. Such rituals interrupt what the modern reader would consider to be the narrative flow of the story and stand out as irreducible non-events. They are described in such detail, however, that they must have been as important as the narrative description itself. They overwhelm the plot.

The massive ritual events defining the coming of age, marriage, mourning, and the worship of ancestors determine the core of the narrative. The defining ritual events in the novel are the funeral of Lady Yang (volume 2), the second marriage of Chŏng Cham and the funeral of Chŏng Han (the father of Chŏng Cham) (volume 3), the marriage of Chŏng In-gwang (volume 35), marriages of Chŏng Cha-yŏm (daughter of Chŏng Sam), Chŏng Suk-yŏm (daughter of Chŏng Kyŏm)[2], and So Myŏng-nan (concubine of Chŏng In-gwang) (volume 36), the marriage of Chŏng In-gyŏng (son of Chŏng Sam) (volume 46), Chŏng In-sŏng' s

2. Cousin of Chŏng Cham.
3. Cousin of Chŏng Cham.

marriages to the concubines Han Nan-so and Miss Yang (volumes 104-106), the coming of age of Chŏng In-ung (volume 134-136), the marriage of Chŏng Sŏng-yŏm (daughter of Chŏng Yŏm)[3] (volume 148), the marriage of Chŏng Cham (volume 153), the marriages of Chŏng In-jung and Chŏng In-ung (volumes 159-160), the marriage of Chŏng Mong-ch' ŏn (volume 161), the marriage of Chŏng In-ung (volume 171), the marriage of Chŏng Mong-ch' ang (volume 175), and the coming of age and marriage of Chŏng Ch' ŏn-hŭng (grandson of Chŏng In-sŏng) (volume 180). Although the constant repetition of ritual events may not engage a modern reader' s attention, the complexities added to any formal event by the birth order of family members, the relative status of wives, concubines and their offspring, and the opposition of natural and adoptive families made each case unique and compelling. The regulations of propriety differ depending on whether the individual is of royal, yangban, commoner, or lower class origin. At any of these events the appropriate actions for a woman differed depending on whether she was a primary consort or a concubine, and for a man depending on whether he was the son of a primary consort or the son of a concubine. Involved discussions in which characters weigh different precedents for behavior and quote the interpretations of propriety found in previous scholarship preceded these significant decisions because the proper behavior for the son of a concubine on the occasion of the primary consort' s death, or for a wife in mourning for her father-in-law when her natural father dies is not self-evident.

Ritual was the discourse in which major social and political events were articulated and the medium at the family level through which matters involving power relationships, inheritance, succession, and conflict resolution were discussed and resolved. The readers of *Wanwolhoemaengyŏn*, particularly its many female readers, took an avid interest in such matters because seemingly minor issues of propriety determined what treatment they received from their offspring, what authority those offspring enjoyed, and how all would be treated within the ancestral shrine after death.

The core story of *Wanwolhoemaengyŏn* concerns the adoption of Chŏng In-sŏng as the son of his natural uncle Chŏng Cham. Chŏng Cham' s wife, Lady Yang, had not produced a son to carry on the primary line, thus causing a crisis that sent tremors through the entire

family. Soon after Chŏng In-sŏng' s adoption as Chŏng Cham' s son and the future patriarch of the Chŏng family, however, Lady Yang dies unexpectedly. Chŏng Cham proceeds to take as his second wife another woman of high status, Sŏ Kyo-wan. Sŏ Kyo-wan gives birth to two sons soon after whom she aspires to establish as heirs to the family at the expense of her adopted son Chŏng In-sŏng. Much of the novel describes the efforts of Chŏng In-sŏng to avoid the infinite machinations and evil plots Sŏ Kyo-wan launches in her tireless campaign to get rid of him. He outwits her but all the while maintains absolutely impeccable behavior towards her within the rules of propriety.

Needless to say, it requires considerable thought for Chŏng In-sŏng to ascertain what his proper behavior as the adopted son should be towards his adopted father' s second wife. The relationship between the two is defined purely by the bounds of social propriety and convention, and not the bonds of human affection or blood. In-sŏng must treat her as a mother even though he is not a son and she is not the original mother of the family.

The Woman's Strategy for an Ingenious Ethical Solution: Chang Søng-wan

There are two families tied by marriage alliances that stand at the center of *Wanwolhoemaengyŏn*: the Chŏng family under the patriarch Chŏng Cham and the Chang family under the patriarch Chang Hŏn. Chang Hŏn is a classic *soin* (小人), or lesser man, whose behavior is petty and self-interested. Just as Chŏng In-sŏng must struggle to find an appropriate response to the machinations of his stepmother Sŏ Kyo-wan after his adoption into the primary family lineage, Chŏng In-sŏng' s brother, Chŏng In-gwang, faces similar challenges after he is engaged to the lesser man Chang Hŏn' s daughter (through a concubine) Chang Sŏng-wan. In the case of Chŏng In-sŏng, the primary focus falls on his difficult relationship with his stepmother; in the case of Chŏng In-gwang, it falls on his conflict with his father-in-law. The novel is not built around the love or romance of the husband and wife involved in the marriages, but rather the relationship between parents-in-law and children-in-law.

Chang Hŏn senses that the family led by Chŏng Sam is in decline

within the political realm because perfidious government officials increasingly dominate the court. He comes to regret the engagement he previously established between his daughter and Chŏng In-gwang, and goes as far as to declare that it be broken off. Chang Hŏn wants to find a son-in-law from either a dominant political family or the royal family itself so as to forward the fortunes of his family. His daughter Sŏng-wan becomes but a pawn in her father' s political ambitions.

Although Chang Hŏn may be a petty man, his daughter Sŏng-wan is a woman with a strong personality and a deep sense of morality who refuses to follow simply the orders of her vain father. Nonetheless, although Sŏng-wan feels that following her father' s orders to break off the engagement to Chŏng In-gwang and to seek a strategic marriage with a wealthy and powerful family would be immoral, she cannot simply refuse her father' s demands within the Confucian moral universe. To do so would be equivalent to abandoning the most core value: filial piety. Any act that defies filial piety is immoral in the Confucian ethical world. Sŏng-wan finds herself trapped between two conflicting ethical impulses that freeze her in complete inaction. In the end she resolves to cut off her own ear and disfigure her face with a knife in a desperate attempt to resolve the clashing demand of propriety that she both remain absolutely obedient to her father and not do anything morally wrong.

By scarring her own face, Sŏng-wan attempts to assure that no powerful family will see her as a desirable daughter-in-law. The modern Korean novel (or Western European novel for that matter) often treats the conflict between the daughter' s desire to marry the man she loves and the selfish attempt of her parents to marry her to someone else. What is different in the eighteenth century novel such as *Wanwolhoe-maengyŏn* is that although the characters act autonomously and display distinct personalities with a full capacity for moral reasoning, they take larger issues of family and societal order as their ultimate moral imperative. Sŏng-wan makes her moral decision entirely of her own will, but the consequences of her decision are the reaffirmation of the absolute value of the family and the hierarchical status of her father.

The following quote describes the moment of Sŏng-wan' s self-disfigurement.

> Suddenly a choked scream rang out that sent a chilling shudder of fear through everyone' s entire body. The nurse maid immediately called out to Miss Sŏng-wan and continued ten times in a row, but there was no answer to be had. Ch' unhŭng and Ch' uyŏn subsequently came running into the room in tears.

"Something is definitely amiss,"

> They said, lifting up the blankets. The nurse maid also lifted those same blankets in a flurry to get a look.
> There was Miss Sŏng-wan, her radiant forehead and her body, her entirety, was enfolded in a brilliant aura. Her gorgeous face and enticing figure are without rival in ten thousand years of history. She is the silver moon that wanders the expansive skies of autumn; her brilliant light drifts down over the infinite stretch of the earth. She is the red sun that beams down on the mists of dawn. Her incandescence illuminates the most distant corners of creation.
> Thus in that red light of morning, heaven and earth were cut apart with the slicing of an ear. The color drained from the myriad things in the universe of her visage. And that air of the immortal, those bones of jasper, how much their appearance has changed. This world and the next were sundered apart so that no meeting was possible again. Only the scarlet blood continued to flow over the pillow, the blankets, and down the bed frame.
> There was a clump of meat dressed in clothes lying down. She held a sharp knife of a few inches length in her soft jade hands. Her pure white fingers clutched the blade tightly. Her hair buns, the color of cobalt clouds, drooped down in disorder. She tried to cut off her right ear. Although she managed to violate her ear' s fine form, her energy failed her. She fainted, and fell down, lost to the world, before she could hack it off. Unsuccessful in making herself a corpse, she lay there as a mass of raw meat. (volume 23)

The stylistic features of this passage are disconcerting, even disorienting. At first Sŏng-wan' s abstract beauty is described by poetic allu-

sions to the moon and sun that quickly transcend the immediate and concrete. When she is described as "the silver moon that wanders the expansive skies of autumn" her actual physical appearance is completely elided. The reason for such tropes is that Sŏng-wan is a virtuous woman who deserves narration in the eternal language of the Chinese classical tradition.

Yet the moment that such far-fetched metaphors describe her is precisely the moment that she is seen by her nurse maid bleeding-a horribly disfigured woman. The ideal projection of the topos of the woman whose beauty matches her virtue is directly undercut in the following passage when she is described most laconically as a "a clump of meat dressed in clothes." The description of her as a beautiful woman is a recollection of her appearance before self-mutilation, but it is placed directly before a most brutal description of her body which is not covered in classical analogies. The allusive projection of her persona remains close to exalted literary Chinese and the vivid description of her damaged appearance is closer to spoken Korean.

Sŏng-wan' s decision to disfigure herself transforms her from a creature of jade to a mass of meat. It is only when she literally rewrites her own body through the cutting off of her ear that she achieves audible self-expression as a women within the Confucian discourse otherwise dominated by literary Chinese.

Sŏng-wan' s self-mutilation was foreseen by her younger brothers, and her servants feared that she would take some rash action. For this reason it was only after Sŏng-wan had successfully comforted the company around her that she could carry out her disfigurement. She did not act in spontaneous anguish, but in a calculated means of expression.

How was it that those around her foresaw her self-mutilation? And why did she feel she had no choice but to disfigure herself? The moral universe she occupied left her with no other options. In theory, there were three possible roads open to her. First, she could follow her father' s order to marry. Second, she could refuse her father' s order and confront him. Third, she could force her father to withdraw his order. The last road was the only one she could follow.

If she followed her father' s order, she would break her obligations of chastity to her betrothed Chŏng In-gwang. Such an act would leave

here an ignominious name that could not be shaken off. Not only would she bring shame to herself, she would leave an indelible blot on her family' s escutcheon causing dishonor not only to her father but all ancestors. Sŏng-wan is a rigid follower of the Confucian ideal of the virtuous woman, or *yŏllyŏ*. Such a shameful reputation was the equivalent of a death sentence for her. Moreover, within the world of *Wanwolhoemaengyŏn*, female characters who lose their chastity cease to be members of their kinship groups. The loss of chastity was the equivalent of being banished from human society and thus ruled out the first option of following her father' s order.

Another story even involving Chŏng Sam' s daughter Chŏng Sŏng-yŏm is illustrative of the stakes involved for a woman under even the slightest suggestion of impropriety. Groundless rumors that a suggestive painting of Sŏng-yŏm was being passed around foment a family scandal. She ends up in complete seclusion in an isolated wing of the estate where she must dwell in shame in spite of her complete innocence (volume 57). It is no surprise why Sŏng-wan is determined to maintain her chastity at any cost - the stakes involved not only the self, but the entire family.

The question that remains is how it was that if the status of women was so low, their actions were so critical to the reputation and authority of the family. The answer is that it was precisely in the proper execution of propriety, *ye*, that Korean women could assert themselves as autonomous individuals. Even given her father' s immoral nature, Sŏng-wan cannot simply refuse him. To reject an order from one' s father was the worst form of disrespect towards a parent. And disrespect was the gravest crime within the moral dictates of filial piety. After Sŏng-wan maims herself, her father, rather than making an effort to see his daughter as she lies gravely ill, "spends his days in the jovial drinking of wine" (volume 23) with his newly obtained concubine Chŏng-ssi (Chŏng-ssi is Chang Hŏn' s son-in-law, Sŏng-wan' s betrothed, Chŏng In-gwang in female attire).

Chang Hŏn is able to scold his daughter in the following manner as a father with complete self-righteous indignation because of the absolute conceptual status of filial piety. His personal shortcomings as a petty man are irrelevant to the author.

As might have been expected, Master Chang beat his breast and

cried out:

> "Each child considers his or her father as a mortal enemy, not knowing the benediction that they receive from the trials of their parents who give him or her life as great as heaven. He or she is unaware of the important status that the powerful hold in government. Through such behavior the child causes their father to fall into the nets of danger where he is entangled and destroyed. How can this be the way of children?
> Originally I thought it my duty in life to raise up our family in the world, marry all of you off well, and watch the continuing generations of grandchildren come into the world. But you have been so childish and made such unreasonable demands that your father cannot bear it. What am I to do? When looking at all of you I would gladly cut my throat and die. After father is dead you can all live happily together with your sister."
>
> So saying he took up the knife and made to cut his throat.(volume 23)

Chŏng Hŏn, ignoring the marriage engagement he made with Chŏng Sam, made an informal agreement the previous day for Sŏng-wan to marry the King's daughter's son, Prince Pŏm. He takes this informal agreement more seriously. Sŏng-wan's resistance to her father's selection forces him into a crisis with regards to his political relations. Chŏng Hŏn makes as if to commit suicide as a means of compelling Sŏng-wan to change her mind. Under such circumstances it becomes impossible for Sŏng-wan to continue refusing her father's order directly to his face. For this reason she found herself with no choice but to select the third option.

There were various means of forcing her father to withdraw his order. Sŏng-wan could have simply run away from home. She could also have committed suicide. Rather she chose to disfigure herself as a solution to the problem that faced her. On first glance, running away from home would seem by far the easiest solution to the problem. Yet, as that master of Chinese modernism Lu Xun said regarding the fate of Nora, the protagonist of Ibsen's play *A Doll's House*, "If you run away

from home without warning, what are you going to do then?" Lu Xun gave only three harsh possibilities for Nora's future: she is reduced to prostitution, she commits suicide, or she returns home again in shame (Lu Xun 1927). In other words, for a virtuous woman, running away from home is but a matter of putting off suicide for a few days.

Chŏng Wol-yŏm, the daughter of Chŏng Cham, and the wife of Chang Hŏn's son Chang Ch'ang-lin, runs into bandits on the road while travelling (volume 5). She is cut off from the rest of the family and immediately resolves to kill herself. Wŏl-yŏm's actions give some sense of the terrible gravity of an unmarried woman leaving home without proper arrangements. Chang Sŏng-wan recovers her original appearance after so disfiguring herself in response to her father's demands. The next time, her father attempts to take her to the home of Prince Pŏm by force. Sŏng-wan resolves to run away from home at this point. In the end, after escaping, she meets up with bandits and attempts to throw herself to her death to avoid them. Running away from home was equivalent to suicide for a virtuous woman.

Suicide was both the most painful and the simplest solution to the problems confronting a woman swimming within the sea of Confucian concepts when the tide was against her. For this reason women who attempt to preserve their chastity for the sake of their parents, such as Sim Ch'ŏng, the heroine of the popular short novel of Sim *Ch'ŏng chŏn*, frequently choose to drown themselves in traditional narrative. In another example, Yi Hyŏn-yŏng, heroine of the novel *Okwonchae hapkiyŏn* (Fabulous Tale of the Reuniting Jade Mandarin Ducks), not only runs away from home, she also tries some seven times to kill herself in the most reckless manner (Jung Byung-sul 1998b). One could even say that the heroines of Korean traditional novels spend a lifetime looking for the opportunity to commit suicide for some high purpose. The theme of suicide in the pre-modern Korean novel is so extremely frequent that it borders on the prosaic, even the cliched. By contrast, the disturbing image of Sŏng-wan, a woman of beauty disfigured, must have made a deeper impact on the traditional reader. The gruesome act of disfigurement brings into focus the full severity of the ideological chains of Confucianism that ensnared women of the Chosŏn period.

The Moral Fabric of a Woman: Sø Kyo-wan

The figure who challenges the reader to think most deeply about the nature of propriety is the second wife of Chŏng Cham, Sŏ Kyo-wan, an intelligent and complex personality who dominates the narrative. *Wanwolhoemaengyŏn* limns a viable moral universe and does not contain the existential conflicts between incompatible values that typify realism in the mimetic tradition of the modern period. Nevertheless, Sŏ Kyo-wan presents a challenge to the Confucian conception of moral action. The most memorable and compelling figure in the novel, standing at the center of many of the plots, she spends much of her time in attempts to kill Chŏng In-sŏng.

Kyo-wan defies characterization as a simple evil character. Kyo-wan is described as a fabulous beauty rarely seen in either past or pre—sent — a point unimaginable in almost all narrations of evil characters. She has tremendous literary skills and a profound knowledge of literature and history, ancient and modern. She acts with perfect filiality towards the parents of her husband and maintains the perfect composure and grace of a lady in all situations. She is loving and congenial with her sisters-in-law and affectionate towards and concerned about her extended family. Such attributes suggest a virtuous woman so strongly that her perfect moral action cannot be dismissed as mere hypocrisy.

The question remains how a woman who acts as a moral paradigm within her family would stubbornly insist on trying to murder her stepson and his immediate family. Kyo-wan' s world view is suggested when she says, "Everyone knows that even if I committed a dozen of the most heinous crimes, I never had any intention of doing anything unfilial to my parents-in-law" (volume 166). The implication is that within her own moral perspective she must be supremely proper in her behavior towards those above her in the Confucian family structure at the same time that she attempts to harm those of lower status within the family. Kyo-wan adheres flawlessly to the letter of Confucian ethical law, but she lacks any sense of a universal moral imperative that transcends the particular precedent. She adjusts her behavior in accordance with the status of those with whom she interacts. In sum, she maintains a double moral standard.

Yet Kyo-wan' s double standard cannot be explained away as the

product of a simple inconsistency between her thoughts and her actions. She is absolutely not a character who wears a facade of kindness while hatching evil plots in secret. The contradiction between her moral behavior towards those above and her evil acts towards those below whom she perceives as threats delineates a fissure that runs through her entire being.

The reader gets a clear idea of the complexity of Kyo-wan' s personality from her interactions with her twin sons Chŏng In-jung and Chŏng In-ung. Perhaps unexpectedly, she openly despises her son Chŏng In-jung because of his improper actions, even though he engages similar evil acts in the pursuit of self-interest. By contrast, she loves her son Chŏng In-ung who conducts himself like a saint in all circumstances. If Kyo-wan were merely covering her evil mentality with a facade of moral decency, how could it be that she would bawl out her son Chŏng In-jung, who should be her closest ally, in the following manner.

Chŏng In-jung came to see Lady Sŏ in the afternoon to see whether she was well.[4] Lady Sŏ' s countenance was stern and her voice strained and loud when she questioned him,

> "Although I told both of my two sons to come sleep here at my side each night, you do not listen to me. Where did you sleep last night? Last night you didn' t sleep at the Red Flower Mansion[5] [Kyo-wan' s maternal home] either. Where on earth did you sleep? So remarkable a young man is your brother In-ung that I am embarrassed to even claim that someone like me gave birth to him and raised him. And what about you? How can you disappoint me so terribly?
>
> "In-ung is trying to guide us away from the evil that we do. He senses that there is something amiss in our actions. You should be more careful in your behavior. I know you are disrespectful. Your frivolity and ignorance are extreme.
>
> "You are irritated by this turn of fate that has brought Chŏng In-sŏng here and have tried repeatedly to harm him. You have been

4. An act of propriety on the part of the son.
5. Hong Hwa-pang.

> unable to stop such behavior; I do not esteem you. I am not oblivious to the difference between your brother's virtue and your vice. Since you are unable to stop this habitual behavior I have made up my mind to break off all ties of affection and stop all communication with you."
> When Sŏ Kyo-wan broke off her speech at this point, her face became even more strained and more severe. She glared at him with the coldness of the winter sky and the frosty moon. In-jung was at left at a complete loss. He felt all the more jealous of his brother who received such affection. He would have gone somewhere else to confess his sufferings--but could not think of a place.
> (volume 51)

Kyo-wan brings the full force of moral indignation against her own miscreant son Chŏng In-jung. She questions his own total lack of ethical purpose. Strangely enough, although both Kyo-wan and In-jung have the common goal of eliminating the outsider Chŏng In-sŏng, they are unable to cooperate in their efforts because of Kyo-wan's desire that her son be a moral man, and end up in open conflict. Kyo-wan maintains the highest standards with regards to propriety as she violates basic morality. The contradiction is sufficient to warrant the following summary by the narrator.

> She deeply resented and despised that son of the previous wife [Chŏng In-sŏng] and her failed attempts to murder him became a pernicious habit. Yet in other respects her behavior was spotless and her intentions were the very highest. She emphasized the Confucian way of loyalty and filial piety above all in raising and educating her two sons. She rejected all that was perverse or unrighteous.

The multivalent personality of Kyo-wan creates great complications to the personal relationships between characters thus allowing for a new level of subtleness in the narration of the traditional themes of correct moral action. For example, Chŏng In-ung, the subject of Kyo-wan's most intense affection, aids Chŏng In-sŏng to escape his mother's plots and

thereby frustrates his mother. Chŏng In-ung goes as far as to drink the poison intended for In-sŏng himself as a means of saving In-sŏng within the boundaries of filial behavior towards his mother. As a result Kyo-wan almost loses her most precious son as a result of her own evil actions.

Women in the late Chosøn period

What makes *Wanwolhoemaengyŏn* unique among Korean novels of the premodern period is the manner in which the novel manages to describe in some detail the actual living conditions for Korean women while nevertheless describing an ideal world in which the actions of good and evil and characters conform to the demands of Confucian ideology. The darker side of Confucian society is not erased although the novel retains its strict concern with propriety and the ethical life.

To what degree does the absolute and unrelenting nature of Confucian practice as presented in *Wanwolhoemaengyŏn* reflect practice in the Chosŏn dynasty at the family or societal level? The strict regime imposed on women in a gentry family caused great strain to the physical and mental well-being of women because maintaining the impeccable role of daughter, wife or mother consisted of a difficult tightrope walk. It was not sufficient to be impeccable in one' s actions since false rumors about the family or the evil deeds of children and relatives were traced back to women. Women had to repress all emotions and behave as models of Confucian behavior. A disproportionate number of women in premodern Korean novels suffer from "pains in the chest," *shimbyŏng*, which are most likely a form of neurosis induced by social pressures. At the very worst, a male protagonist in *Wanwolhoemaengyŏn* suffers from mere heartbreak whereas the women are described enthralled by every form of psychological disorder.

Although women did not have their own formal names, were not recorded in many genealogical records, and could not inherit property, they played a central role in determining the status of a family. Although the restrictions on daily life imposed by the Confucian regimen affected men as well, women were considered as the determining factors for the virtue or vice of a family and subject to the strictest standards of behavior.

REFERENCES

Chŏnju Yi-ssi (18c). *Wanwolhoemaengyŏn* (The Banquet of Betrothal at the Moon-Viewing Pavilion), Vol. 1-12. Edited by Kim, Chin-se (1987-1994). Seoul: Seoul National University Press.

Ch' ae, Chae-gong (1994). *Pŏnam sŏnsaeng munjip* (A Collection of Writings of Pŏnam). Reprint, Seoul: Kyŏngin munhwasa.

Lu, Xun (1927). *Fen* (The Tomb). Beijing: Weimingshe.

Im, Hyŏng-t' aek (1988). "17segi kyubang sosŏl ŏi sŏngnip kwa *Ch' angsŏn kamŏirok*" (Formation of 17th Century Kyubang Novels and *Ch' angsŏn kamŏirok*). In *Tongbanghakji* (Journal of Eastern Learning) 57: 103-170.

Jung, Byung-sul (1998a). *Wanwolhoemaengyŏn yŏngu* (A Study on *Wanwolhoemaengyŏn*) . Seoul: Taehaksa.

Jung, Byung-sul (1998b). "*Okwonchaehapkiyŏn* ŭi yŏsŏng sosŏl ch' ŏk sŏnggyŏk" (Characteristics of Women' s Novel in *Okwonchae hapkiyŏn*), *Hangukmunhwa* (Korean Culture) 21: 45-62.

Jung, Byung-sul (1998c). "*Chosŏn hugi changpyŏn sosŏlsa ŭi chŏnae*" (The History of the Long Novel in Late Chosŏn). In *Hanguk kojŏn sosŏl gwa sŏsa munhak* (Korean Classical Novels and Narratives). Yangpo Yi Sangtaek kyosu hwanryŏk kinyŏm nonch' ong kinyŏm nonch' ong kanhaeng wiwonhoe, 245-262. Seoul: Ch' ipmundang.

Pastreich, Emanuel (1998). "*Kuunmong* sogo" (A Study on *Kuunmong*). In *Hanguk kojŏn sosŏl kwa sŏsa munhak* (Korean Classical Novels and Narratives). Yangpo Yi Sang-taek kyosu hwanryŏk kinyŏm nonch' ong kinyŏm nonch' ong kanhaeng wiwonhoe, 389-401. Seoul: Ch' ipmundang.

Jung Byung-sul is Assistant professor at the Department of Korean Language and Literature, Myongji University. He received his Ph.D. in 1997 from Seoul National University on *Wanwolhoemaengyŏn*. He is also a board member of the Korean Classical Literature Association.