

## Queer(ing) Language in Yi Kwangsu's *Mujŏng*

### *Gender, Sexuality, and Colonial Modernity*

Yi Kwangsu's *Mujŏng* (*Heartless*, 1917) is widely considered the first modern novel written in the Korean language. Despite this common understanding, *Mujŏng* has predecessors among the experimental texts of early modern and colonial Korea, but more suggestively, it comes well after the author's own literary debut years earlier—in Japanese. The complex linguistic and literary history of this moment makes it a productive starting point for a discussion of Zainichi literature, particularly as a response to intersecting empires. As I will show through my reading of *Mujŏng*, colonial Korean subjects faced intersecting hierarchies of not only nation but also gender and sexuality, each one further complicated by the epistemological shifts taking place at the site of these terms as Western and Japanese imperialisms collided with each other to contest their meanings. This is how intersectionality, deployed as a form of queer reading, can enable productive engagements with the incoherence of Yi's text and the context in which it appeared.

Perhaps not coincidentally, a kind of queer sexuality makes an intriguing appearance in Kim Tong'in's literary biography of Yi Kwangsu, who published under the pen name Ch'unwŏn, and later the Japanese name Kayama Mitsurō. Kim's "Ch'unwŏn yŏngu" ("A Study of Ch'unwŏn," 1934–35) discusses Yi's career and its relevance to the beginnings of modern Korean literature.<sup>1</sup> In a section on Yi's short story "Örin pŏt ege" ("To My Young Friend," 1917), which Kim describes as "the first piece of Korean fiction to have been influenced by Western literature," he writes the following, quoting lines from the story:

'Only a brute needs intercourse to be satisfied in a male-female relationship. A civilized, sophisticated gentleman knows the ultimate satisfaction that comes from loving someone mentally, admiring their appearance as well as the elegance of their heart.'

How he clamors for his ideal love! This is the anguished cry of a man who has suffered through a life of loneliness. Not a cry, but rather a shouted curse. He could see none of life's other problems. Only after tasting love could he think of other things; before tasting love nothing else had meaning. . . .

As the target for his love, he did not desire only women. Young men would do just as well. As long as that someone would hold him to their breast, that would be enough.

Thus, his first short story in the formative period of Korean New Literature took the form of 'a passionate longing for love.'<sup>2</sup>

One theme that emerges from this passage is the important role of "love" (*sarang*) in defining both civilization and "Korean New Literature." Love that combines both emotional and bodily aspects is the mark of a civilized person, and the longing for such a love characterizes a new kind of literature. For Yi, writing at a time when the meaning and purpose of literature were being forged and contested under colonial conditions, literature becomes inextricably bound up with emotion (*chöng*), most often the emotions attached to love. This theory of literature is borne out not only in Yi's works of fiction but also in his seminal essay "Munhak iran hao" ("What Is Literature?," 1916), in which he states: "Human emotions are the very foundation of literature. The significance of literature derives from human emotions and human relations."<sup>3</sup> The essay goes on to contend that any nation lacking such a literature "will be stuck in a barbaric and primitive state."<sup>4</sup> In sum, for Yi, a concept of *sarang*, as the primary means of exploring *chöng*, was an essential pillar of modernity, and modernity was the concern not only of individual subjects but also of the *minjok* (J: *minzoku*; ethnonation).

As we can see from Kim's quotation, the notion of love that informs Yi's production of Korean New Literature is never divorced from sexuality. Even as he tries to separate his civilized concept of love from that of the "brute" (*yain*), he can do so only by positing the purely physical sexuality of the latter as conversely uncivilized. In this way, Yi's concept of love as marker of civilization is homologous to heteronormativity as marker of modernity. As Foucault famously argues in *The History of Sexuality*, such norms arose from nineteenth-century European medical and psychological discourse, which created the "species" of the homosexual.<sup>5</sup> Building on the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, who similarly dates the rupture of the "male homosocial continuum" to the late nineteenth century,<sup>6</sup> J. Keith Vincent locates a requirement of Japan's modernization at the turn of the twentieth century in the heteronormativity resulting from this rupture: "As exclusive and compulsory heterosexuality became associated with an enlightened modernity, love between men was increasingly branded as either 'feudal' or immature. The resulting rupture . . . thus constituted one of the most significant markers of Japan's entrance into modernity."<sup>7</sup> Insofar as "modern" meant "Western," and the West had embraced heterosexuality as the norm, heteronormativity was a requirement for a claim to modernity. In Korea's case, such a modernity was mediated

by Japan—as was the shift in the definition of literature noted above—which had itself been subject to the same requirement to conform to Western models.

It is ironic, then, that Yi, regarded as a central figure in the project of building a modern Korean literature and importing enlightenment discourse into colonial Korea, would seem according to Kim to have embraced a sexuality at odds with heteronormativity. “Örin pöt ege” is hardly unique among Yi’s early works in its depiction of male-male desire; his Japanese-language debut work “Ai ka” (“Maybe Love,” 1909) tells the story of a Korean student in Tokyo who longs for and is rejected by a Japanese male student, with at least one critic suggesting that the story was based on Yi’s own feelings for a Japanese student at Meiji Gakuin.<sup>8</sup> Although this element of Yi’s early fiction is broadly acknowledged, very little scholarship engages with it directly. One of the few critics to do so, Han Süng-ok, argues that the open homosexuality appearing in Yi’s early short stories becomes coded in later works like *Mujöng*, when the author, “as an enlightenmentist advocate of nationalism,” had to focus on other things.<sup>9</sup> Sin Chiyön, on the other hand, views the homoerotic elements of *Mujöng* as very much out in the open, but traces a shift occurring shortly thereafter in which Yi seems to reject same-sex love as premodern in order to align himself with sexological discourse being translated into Korean in the 1920s.<sup>10</sup> Though the two disagree on exactly when depictions of same-sex love stop being explicit in Yi’s work, both agree that this homoeroticism was somehow incompatible with the project of building a modern Korean nation and its literature.<sup>11</sup>

In any case, it is clear that *Mujöng* lies at a point of transition in Korean discourse on the relationships between sexuality, (colonial) modernity, and literature. The modernity of the work is located both in its concern with themes of individual subjectivity and romantic love and in its innovative vernacular language.<sup>12</sup> Its hangül-only text stands in stark contrast to the mixed script of the articles and essays surrounding its serialized installments on the pages of the *Maeil sinbo*, January to June 1917, an experimental style that attempts to be particularly Korean while qualifying as a properly modern vernacular mode of writing. As noted in chapter 1, Yi’s own critical writing during this period, particularly “Munhak iran hao,” explicitly relates the use of the vernacular to the project of building a modern but particularly Korean body of national literature.

In Yi’s rhetoric on Korean literature, a binary emerges between premodern Korean tradition and Western modernity, a relationship that must always be understood as triangulated by Japanese colonization of the Korean peninsula. Standard readings of *Mujöng* map this binary onto a romantic love triangle present in the novel.<sup>13</sup> The male intellectual protagonist, Yi Hyöngsik, is torn between two love interests: Sönhyöng, the modern girl student who is preparing to study in the United States, and Yöngch’ae, the traditional daughter of his teacher and benefactor who sells herself as a *kisaeng* (courtesan) in an act of filial piety, attempting to free her father from jail.

However, this simplified schematic of the novel fails to account for the many tensions and inconsistencies embedded in the language of the novel’s narrative as

well as in the sexualities narrated, both of which can be productively framed as queer. This intentionally broad application of *queer* builds on David Halperin's definition of the term "not as a positivity but as a positionality, not as a thing, but as a resistance to the norm."<sup>14</sup> Whereas Halperin is thinking of queerness as an identity category that resists sexual norms in particular, heteronormativity is necessarily bound up within a larger network of intersecting and often contradictory norms that constitute a system of power—as we have seen in the case of Yi's colonized Korea and the broader theorization of intersectionality. Just as it is impossible for Yi to forge a new literature that is both Korean and modern under the conditions of colonialism (as the colonizing power always defines the colonized, in this case Korea, as abjectly premodern), the subjects of the novel, particularly the female characters, find it impossible to comply with the overdetermined imperatives of the overlapping forms of patriarchy operative at this transitional moment. In other words, both the linguistic and the sexual norms that govern the space of *Mujöng* are always already impossible to embody.<sup>15</sup>

The incoherence of mutually reinforcing norms has been theorized by Janet Jakobsen as a "working alliance," wherein the contradictory nature of norms within a regime of normativity makes resistance more difficult rather than less.<sup>16</sup> Thus according to Jakobsen, "queering works most effectively when it troubles multiple norms at once, when it addresses a network of dominant norms."<sup>17</sup> My reading of *Mujöng* attempts to situate the novel within just such a network, at the nexus of norms reaching well beyond the sexual and into realms of modernity, (ethno)nation, and, most importantly for my purposes here, the language of literary text. I argue that the novel is a queer text insofar as it troubles all of these norms at once. My purpose, then, is not to highlight previously overlooked homoerotic aspects of the novel but rather to tease out the inherent impossibility of the novel's compliance with sexual and other norms, especially those of written vernacular language. To read the language of *Mujöng* as queer(ing) is to more clearly position the novel as at once troubling and troubled by an entire web of norms mediated by Japanese colonialism, its queer remainders acting as sites of potential reconfiguration of (if not resistance to) the working alliance of East Asian and Western patriarchies. Moreover, this move allows us to see the ultimate embrace of *Mujöng* as a normative text of modern Korean literature, despite its queerness, as a testament to the incoherence of norms under the conditions of colonial modernity and postcoloniality.

#### OVERDETERMINED NORMS AND QUEER RESISTANCE

To explore these queer potentialities, I focus on the character of Yöngch'ae, the kisaeng, who most embodies the paradoxes arising from the novel's views on romantic love and sexuality. Throughout the events of *Mujöng*, Yöngch'ae must navigate the confluence of different forms of patriarchy to which she is subjected. To oversimplify, these are, first, the Confucian patriarchy of the "three obediences"

(to father, husband, and son), and second, the patriarchy inherent in modern Western heteronormativity. Thus for Yŏngch'ae, complying with the rules dictated for female sexuality always involves a negotiation between two competing sets of such rules, the modern and the premodern.

Although the most basic reading of the novel situates Yŏngch'ae solidly on the premodern, more purely or traditionally Korean, side of this binary, Yŏngch'ae's position is in fact much more fluid and complex than this schematic view of the novel suggests. In fact, it is Yŏngch'ae's father's tutelage that establishes Hyŏngsik, the novel's central character, as a modern man in the first place. Yŏngch'ae's father is described as follows:

Scholar Pak traveled to the state of Qing and brought back dozens of different kinds of new books published in Shanghai. He got an idea of what the situation was like in the West, and conditions in Japan, and realized that Korea could not go on as it was at present; thereupon, he tried to begin a "new civilization" movement. . . . Scholar Pak immediately cut his hair short and put on black clothes, and he had his two sons do the same. At the time, cutting one's hair and wearing black clothing was a very courageous decision. It symbolized the shattering of established customs that had been followed for over four thousand years, and adopting completely new ways.<sup>18</sup>

As is clear from this introduction to Scholar Pak, he cannot be positioned unequivocally in the traditional camp, even when compared on the other side of the love triangle to Sŏnhŏng's father, a practicing Christian who has studied in the United States. This is not to say that Pak is unquestionably modern, either. The contradictions inherent in his (and Yŏngch'ae's) position are illustrated by the education he gives Yŏngch'ae: "Though others laughed at him, Scholar Pak ignored them and sent his daughter to school. When she returned from school, he would teach her texts such as the *Elementary Learning* and *Biographies of Exemplary Women*, and the summer she turned twelve years old, he taught her the *Classic of Poetry* too" (no. 5). Presumably "others laugh at him" because the notion of sending a daughter to school is something new and foreign that Scholar Pak carries out as part of his "new civilization" worldview, but at the same time, Pak teaches his daughter the traditional Chinese texts that *yangban* ladies would have learned in the Chosŏn period as well. In this case, as with arguably every major character in the novel, the modern-versus-premodern binary cannot be easily applied. In fact, one of the novel's most deep-seated contradictions is its simultaneous desire for and resistance toward modernity.

This contradiction eventually ensnares Yŏngch'ae, making it impossible for her to behave morally. Her classical education demands that she seek virtue through her relationships with men: first by practicing filial piety toward her father and then, after he dies, by preserving her virginity for Hyŏngsik, the man she believes her father wished her to marry. In both cases, however, Yŏngch'ae is thwarted. When her father is wrongfully imprisoned, Yŏngch'ae models herself after "women

who sold themselves in order to redeem their father's sins" in "the stories of old" (no. 15), selling herself as a kisaeng to obtain the money to support her father. Not only does she fail to get him released from prison, as she is swindled out of the selling price of her own body, her father curses her decision to become a kisaeng and starves himself to death in his rage. Yŏngch'ae is then left with the guilt of having hastened her father's death—never mind the fact that it was the very education he gave her that led her to make the decision he ends up condemning. Yŏngch'ae then spends the next seven years preserving her virginity, "following the examples of women of olden times," only to "fail" again when she is raped.<sup>19</sup> Hence Yŏngch'ae is confronted with actual sexual violence in addition to the violence of the impossible standards imposed on her behavior as a woman.

The impossible demands of Scholar Pak's ambivalently "traditional" worldview are further compounded by the modern norms Yŏngch'ae confronts. After she is raped, Yŏngch'ae flees to Pyongyang to end her life, which she believes to be the only moral option available to her. She is stopped by Pyŏng'uk, a woman on vacation from her studies in Japan. Pyŏng'uk makes a powerful appeal for Yŏngch'ae to live, in which she mounts an attack on traditional morals: "You have been a slave of such outdated thought, and have tasted futile suffering. Free yourself from those shackles. Awake from your dream. Be a person who lives for herself. Attain freedom" (no. 90). Yŏngch'ae comes to accept Pyŏng'uk's view of the world in lieu of the one she inherited from her father, but the novel is not willing to endorse the shift completely. Even Pyŏng'uk, the most hard-line "new woman" (*sinyŏsŏng*) in the novel, is made to see the value of "traditional" ideas.

Pyŏng'uk learned traditional knowledge from Yŏngch'ae, and had a taste of Eastern emotions. Pyŏng'uk had disliked anything that was outdated. After coming into contact with Yŏngch'ae's thorough understanding of traditional thought, though, Pyŏng'uk realized that there were appealing aspects to even traditional thought. She even thought of studying the *Elementary Learning, Biographies of Exemplary Women*, and classical Chinese poetry and prose. She took out dust-covered books at home, such as the *Genuine Treasures of Classical Literature*, and studied these books with Yŏngch'ae, and memorized what she learned. 'This is such fun,' she would exclaim, rejoicing like a child, and she would recite the texts out loud. 'Hm,' Pyŏng'uk's father would say when he heard his daughter reciting classical texts, though it was not clear whether he was praising her, or expressing ridicule (no. 91).

In the end, the skeptical and ambivalent voice of Pyŏng'uk's father reflects the narrative tone of much of the novel—somewhere between mocking and approval—toward both the "traditional" values of Korea and the often ill-conceived efforts of the characters to turn away from them toward what is new or "civilized." The result is that multiple normative systems operate simultaneously on Yŏngch'ae and the other characters, overtly contradicting each other even as they more subtly contradict themselves.

Yöngch'ae's queer sexuality begins to make sense as a response to—or consequence of—this incoherence. When Yöngch'ae and her older kisaeng “sister” Wörhwa awaken to a heterosexual desire for men, which is linked in the text to awakening as a modern subject, they turn to each other, rather than to men, to release that desire. Their erotic relationship begins shortly after they witness a group of male students singing together. The song repeats a trope in the novel used to position characters like Scholar Pak and Hyöngsik as being advocates for the “modern,” the trope of being the lone person awake among sleepers:

While other people on earth dream,  
I alone am awake [*na man iröna*].  
I look up at the sky  
and sing a sad song (no. 32).

Upon hearing this song, Wörhwa falls for one of the students, which the novel marks as the beginning of her desire for men. This could be understood as a desire for modernity itself, always remaining unfulfilled under colonialism. Thus, as in the students' song, it becomes a source of sadness:

When Yöngch'ae saw how Wörhwa had been suffering ever since the party . . . Yöngch'ae guessed that something had happened to Wörhwa. Yöngch'ae had also begun to feel a longing for the male sex. Her face grew hot when she faced a strange man, and when she lay down alone at night, she wished that there was someone who would hold her. Once, when Yöngch'ae and Wörhwa came back from a party late at night, and had gone to bed together in the same bed, Yöngch'ae put her arms around Wörhwa in her sleep, and kissed her on the mouth. Wörhwa laughed to herself. ‘So you have awakened as well [*nö to kkaeökkuna*],’ she thought. ‘Sadness and suffering lie ahead of you’ (no. 32).

Notably, this installment contains an overlap in metaphors of awakening as a modern subject and awakening as a sexual subject, both linked to a “sadness” that arises from a desire that cannot be satisfied. This “awakened” desire presents yet another impossibility for Wörhwa and Yöngch'ae, who, as we have seen, are already confronted with the impossibility of meeting the mutually exclusive requirements of the patriarchal value systems in place, particularly from their marginal position as kisaeng.

At the moment both women come face to face with the weight of this impossibility, their homoerotic relationship begins. They embrace and kiss each other in place of the men they long for. One way to read Yöngch'ae's queer sexuality, then, is as an outlet for the tension built up by the incoherent demands of colonial modernity. With heteronormative desire for men—naturalized as a bodily response by the reference to Yöngch'ae's face flushing—at once required and censored, Yöngch'ae's only choice is to substitute a queer desire that both mimics and upends the normative practice that is always inaccessible to her. In a moment that strikes today's reader as ironic, the narrative claims that “it was Wörhwa who had



given Yŏngch'ae half the strength to think of Hyŏngsik as her partner in life and to remain chaste for seven years" (no. 34) even after Wŏrhwa replaces Hyŏngsik as the object of Yŏngch'ae's desire. Thus Yŏngch'ae responds to the contradictions in normative demands for chastity by creating a contradiction of her own, protecting her virginity by engaging in a seemingly erotic practice.

Notably, at the time of *Mujŏng*'s publication, this particular kind of female-female relationship—even if it did entail eroticism—tended to be written off as platonic. In the case of Japan, schoolgirl crushes and other homosocial (and sometimes homoerotic) bonds were referred to as *dōseiai* (same-sex love), but nevertheless were not considered sexually deviant.<sup>20</sup> In both contexts, female-female desire is illegible as sexuality. Importantly, this illegibility does not arise from a lack of visibility or representation—the queer eroticism here is out in the open. What I want to suggest is that Wŏrhwa and Yŏngch'ae's desire for each other is not *read* as sexual. This is not simply because it is nonnormative, as male-male sexuality in this period was beginning to become legible as difference or deviation from the norm. It is the intersectional incoherence of norms surrounding gender and sexuality, as well as the dominant allegorical reading of these characters, that renders this particular difference illegible. In this respect, *Mujŏng* is a paradigmatic example of the ways that hermeneutical models demanding that texts represent a given nation ignore whatever fails to cohere into such a reading. And what fails to cohere is precisely this kind of intersectional difference.

#### THE QUEER POTENTIAL OF ORTHOGRAPHIC INCOHERENCE

As with sexuality, the queerness of the novel's language similarly arises from contradictory demands brought on by a transition between (and overlapping of) norms. This tension is produced as the text sets out to occupy an always already foreclosed space that is both modern and nationally Korean.<sup>21</sup> On the pages of the *Maeil sinbo* where *Mujŏng* was serialized, it is clear that there is not a single, standardized mode of writing in the Korean language, even within the narrow limits of a fairly highbrow publication. The serialized installments of *Mujŏng*, which use hangŭl almost exclusively, stand out on the page, whose columns are filled with *kukhanmun*. The dominant orthographic style at the time, *kukhanmun* consists largely of sinographs with Korean script filling in grammatical information, as in the Japanese mixed-script style still in use today. *Mujŏng* deviates from this standard, carving out a particular style for the genre of fiction. This stylistic experiment, which would eventually become the dominant mode of writing, must be understood in the context of a discourse on the modern vernacular. The hangŭl-only orthographic style of *Mujŏng* may have offered the best prospects for developing into the kind of vernacular written language that was required, according to Yi, to produce a modern novel in a particularly Korean medium, which



Yi saw as the basis for Korean literature.<sup>22</sup> That is, its deployment can be seen as an attempt to depart from the ostensibly ideographic (ergo premodern) forms of Chinese writing—including those appropriated and reworked via Japanese—and to empower a writing style with claims to being both more straightforwardly phonetic (ergo modern) and uniquely Korean, Yi's stated conditions for the written language of modern Korean literature.<sup>23</sup>

The problem is that, upon closer examination, both of these claims are belied by the language of *Mujŏng*. What appears to be unadulterated Korean vernacular script is always already the product of the linguistic admixture characterizing East Asia at this moment. The hangŭl orthography of the text creates a contrast between the installments of the novel and the surrounding articles and essays, perhaps in an effort to distance itself from the *hanja* (sinographs) that constituted the basis for premodern forms of Korean writing, which Yi went out of his way to exclude from the category of Korean literature, as discussed in chapter 1. This may also have had the effect of creating a greater sense of separation from Japanese, versus the mixed-orthography texts that shared a common kanji/hanja vocabulary with the language of the colonizer. However, that vocabulary is still present in the hangŭl text of *Mujŏng*, and for readers of a paper published almost exclusively in the mixed-script style, the Japanese-mediated hanja corresponding to that vocabulary must have been easy to visualize, even in the absence of the actual characters on the page.

This absence is key, because it invites a different kind of interaction with the text from its readers, who supply the hanja rather than deciphering them. On the one hand, this interpellation of the reader gestures at the production of meaning by external normative frameworks rather than the innocent representation of meaning wholly within the text. But on the other hand, in asking the reader to imagine things that are not actually there, this absence creates an ethical configuration between text and reader, a mode of interacting that allows for a sidestepping of direct representation and the violence it often entails.

Ultimately, Yi was faced with a more acute version of the same anomaly embedded in discourse on *genbun itchi*, the Japanese effort to “unify spoken and written language”: a discussion that set up the West and China as two poles in a dichotomy, but could only take place in a language that already contained elements of both. All available modes of writing were already overloaded with meanings mediated by and negotiated among a multiplicity of languages and forms, none of which could be disentangled.<sup>24</sup> In sum, the norms governing the style of the text are internally incoherent, as are those governing Yŏngch'ae's sexuality.

In the same way, the text wriggles out of these constraints through a sort of queer practice, a deviation from the assumed norms of the language that exposes their inherent incoherence. The very first installment of the novel, even as it is presented in a strikingly “pure” hangŭl form, includes representations of English and Japanese, creating a multilingual setting for the interactions of the novel's

characters. These foreign words are blended into the Korean text insofar as they are transcribed into hangŭl rather than presented in Japanese or English orthographies, but on the other hand they are marked for emphasis, distinguishing them as something other. The text simultaneously accommodates and excludes the foreign.

These instances of heteroglossia also undermine the notion of the novel's text as strictly phonetic, representing the speech of the characters in an unmediated fashion—a project that is of course impossible in the first place. Although the transcription of the Japanese and English words into hangŭl is a phonetic function of the script, many of these transcriptions are followed by parenthetical glosses of the foreign terms. These glosses create two competing layers of signs, the sounds of which could not be uttered by the same person at the same time. This structure draws attention to the nature of hangŭl as visual medium: in its most phonetic moment, setting out to represent nothing more than the non-meaning sound of a foreign sign, the text ironically emphasizes its distance from the oral. It records noiseless meaning and meaningless noise in juxtaposition. The language of the novel, from its very first page, is always more fluid, more flexible, more queer than the oversimplified frameworks of modern vernacular language can accommodate.<sup>25</sup>

The queer ambivalence of the language comes into its starkest relief at a moment when Yŏngch'ae's queer sexuality becomes radicalized in response to her rape. Yŏngch'ae is being assaulted by clients when Hyŏngsik and his friend Sin Usŏn arrive on the scene and stop them in the act. At that moment Usŏn declares in Japanese that they are “too late” [*mō dame da*], implying that the rape has already taken place (no. 39). The installments immediately following contain some of the most striking contradictions in the novel's linguistic and sexual norms. When those norms reach their most violent and restrictive, a queer presence that was once subtle becomes much more disruptive.

First, it is worth noting that the narrative leaves open the question of whether Yŏngch'ae was actually penetrated during her (attempted?) rape. When Usŏn comes to see Hyŏngsik the day after the rape, the narrative suggests that Usŏn may have been somewhat disingenuous when he said they were too late. The next morning, Usŏn debates whether to tell Hyŏngsik the truth:

Sin Usŏn believed that Hyŏngsik was a man of such character that Hyŏngsik would marry Yŏngch'ae. However, if Hyŏngsik made Yŏngch'ae his wife, the scene [of the rape] would always remain in Hyŏngsik's mind and would cause him much pain and suffering. It was within Sin's power to decide whether or not Hyŏngsik would suffer. For only he [and the perpetrators] knew whether or not Yŏngch'ae was still a virgin. Sin wanted to torment Hyŏngsik for a long time by withholding this secret (no. 46).

According to this, even Yŏngch'ae does not know whether she is still a virgin, though it is possible she is simply left out of Usŏn's list of those who know—after all, it is not her “pain and suffering” that is of concern here, only Hyŏngsik's.

In any case, although this passage implies that Yŏngch'ae may not have been actually penetrated, the narrative goes on from this point referring to the rape as if this had occurred. The details of the event remain obscure.

Perhaps this ambiguity is the only way the novel can justify its contradictory stances on Yŏngch'ae's status after surviving the rape. On one hand, Yŏngch'ae must remain a sympathetic character, as she remains central to the novel's development through its final installments, and Hyŏngsik can demonstrate how enlightened he is by declaring that Yŏngch'ae's life still has value. On the other hand, Hyŏngsik does not seem to question the notion that Yŏngch'ae's rape constitutes a moral failing on her part and a debasement of her body's value, and the narrative continually censures Yŏngch'ae for having been "defiled" (*töryöpdä*). The only way to resolve the tension between the two positions is to allow for the possibility that Yŏngch'ae was not really raped and therefore remains a suitable object of sympathy for Hyŏngsik.

By contrast, Yŏngch'ae's own strategy for overcoming this contradiction is to die. After the rape, Yŏngch'ae resolves to throw herself in the Taedong River in Pyongyang, where her lover Wŏrhwa did the same, again suggesting a more significant romantic attachment between the two than is usually acknowledged. Yŏngch'ae's planned suicide is motivated not only by a perceived sense of guilt at her failure to preserve her virginity but also by her desire to be with Wŏrhwa once again. It is not inconceivable that this journey toward a death shared with Wŏrhwa is Yŏngch'ae's ultimate rejection of the heteronormative patriarchy that has finally subjected her to one of its most grotesque form of violence.

Ironically, Yŏngch'ae's "death" becomes her greatest source of power in the novel, despite the fact that she never actually carries out her suicide, unbeknownst to Hyŏngsik and the reader until later in the novel. The specter of Yŏngch'ae's raped and bleeding body haunts Hyŏngsik. In fact, even before she departs for Pyongyang, Yŏngch'ae begins to turn her attack around, transforming her "tainted" blood into a weapon. In her first encounter with the old woman who runs the kisaeng house after her rape, she is already a ghostly and terrifying figure. As she attempts to inflict harm upon herself in this scene, we also get the impression that it is the old woman, rather than Yŏngch'ae, who is most threatened by the violence inflicted on Yŏngch'ae's body. When Yŏngch'ae screams, "My blood is tainted blood," it sounds as much like a threat to disseminate her blood, now weaponized, as it does a statement of guilt or regret for her lost virginity (no. 42).

Despite never witnessing this moment, Hyŏngsik sees a similar vision of a blood-spraying Yŏngch'ae in a dream involving his other love interest, Sŏnhŏng.

He could see Sŏnhŏng and Yŏngch'ae side by side. At first they were both dressed in garments white as snow, and each held a flower in one hand, and held one hand open towards Hyŏngsik, as though asking him to clasp their hands. 'Take my hand, Hyŏngsik! Please!,' they said, smiling and holding their head slightly to one

side coquettishly. Shall I take this hand, or that one? Hyöngsik thought, and reached both of his hands into the air, then hesitated. Then Yöngch'ae's appearance began to change. The white, snowlike dress gave way to a bloody, torn skirt of some nameless kind of silk, and her bloodied legs showed through the torn skirt. Tears fell from her eyes, and her lip was bleeding. The flower in her hand disappeared, and she held instead a fistful of soil. He shook his head and opened his eyes. Sönh'yöng still stood before him, dressed in white, and smiling. 'Please take my hand, Hyöngsik!,' she said, reaching her hand out to him, and bowing her head. When Hyöngsik reached for Sönh'yöng's hand in a daze, Yöngch'ae's face as she stood beside Sönh'yöng was hideously transformed like that of a ghost. She bit her lip and sprayed blood over Hyöngsik. Hyöngsik started with terror (no. 45).

Hyöngsik's dream links Yöngch'ae's radical and violent transformation more explicitly to the injustice of her situation. Not only does Hyöngsik have all the power in the fantasy he sets up, choosing between two women who beg to be with him, but he compounds the violence of Yöngch'ae's rape by chasing her out of the fantasy as soon as the marks of this violence become visible. In the end, however, he is unable to keep her away, apparently not even by opening his eyes. It is when he rejects her this way and makes a move toward accepting the still ostensibly pure Sönh'yöng that Yöngch'ae becomes monstrous and sprays him with blood as she does the old woman. Yöngch'ae's "ghost"—both alive and dead, real and imagined—is a queer presence; her defiled blood, even if it lacks substance, has a radical power to trouble the very attitudes that view her body as defiled in the first place.

Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that Hyöngsik argues shortly thereafter that it is wrong for Yöngch'ae to choose to die, disallowing the power she obtains as a queer ghostly figure. His case is presented in episode 53, a strange installment that breaks from the plot of the story and takes a form more like that of an essay. Episode 53 also represents a stark shift in the style of the novel, its text containing a sudden burst of sinographs. The installment is structured to contrast the views of Usön and Hyöngsik on Yöngch'ae's responsibilities after being raped, with the narrative ruling in favor of Hyöngsik's ostensibly more compassionate view that Yöngch'ae should not commit suicide simply because her virginity is lost. It begins by presenting a logical fallacy in Usön's view of the situation, which sees suicide as the proper course of action for Yöngch'ae as a "good woman" who has lost her virginity, even though he would have had no problem with Yöngch'ae as a *kisaeng* going on living without her virginity. The narrator points out that "if one followed the implications of this line of thought, one could say that Usön believed that it was a sin for a 'virtuous woman' to be unchaste, but not a sin for a woman who was not a 'virtuous woman' to be unchaste. This was a reversal of premise and conclusion. In actuality one did not remain chaste because one was a virtuous woman; one was a virtuous woman because one was chaste" (no. 53). If Usön's logic is unfair, however, then so is the narrator's counterpoint, which implies that Yöngch'ae, having been raped, is no longer a "virtuous woman."

Indeed, Hyöngsik's opinion on the matter struggles with this same contradiction. He recognizes that Yöngch'ae's failure to remain chaste was not intentional, but rather than absolve her of blame, he concludes that she has responsibilities beyond those of remaining chaste and loyal to her parents (the only moral imperatives guiding Usön's view, it would seem) and must remain alive to carry out these further responsibilities.

Even if she had failed to carry out these two responsibilities, she still had countless other responsibilities in her life. There was the responsibility of loyalty, and her responsibility to the world, and to animals, and to the mountains and streams, and stars, [and to God,] and to Buddha. It was wrong for her to end a life with so many responsibilities, just for the sake of two duties (even if those two duties were important, and even if she had not succeeded in fulfilling those duties as she wished). It was nevertheless one of life's glories when a person who was passionate, and pure of mind and body, made their most important responsibilities their very life (no. 53).

Not only does this position further burden Yöngch'ae with "responsibilities" beyond chastity and filial piety (which were impossible for her to fulfill in the first place), it also hedges in the final line, allowing that Usön's position—that Yöngch'ae's virginity was equivalent to her entire life's value—could also be "one of life's glories." In the end, Hyöngsik's view is no less confused than Usön's, though the narrative leaves the inconsistencies in the former implicit. In the end, Yöngch'ae is faced once again with competing normative systems, both endorsed by the narrative and both internally contradictory, eradicating all possibility for her to meet their demands.

However, it is at this point that the queer language of episode 53 intervenes to make this paradox visible, just as Yöngch'ae's queer sexuality does earlier in the novel. At the moment the narrating voice fails to call out the incoherence of those normative demands, a sort of translating presence appears, rendering the narrative voice itself incoherent. This highly visible critique is enacted through the breakdown of the vernacular prose of the installment, which contains multiple sinographic glosses in most lines, each gloss placed in parentheses after the hangül word to which it corresponds. Thus the vernacular quality of the text is dismantled, as the pronounceable hangül is constantly interrupted by hanja, which must be pronounced either as silence or as repetition.

The overly glossed text of this installment is particularly jarring in comparison with the mixed-script pieces surrounding it on the pages of the *Maeil sinbo*, which do not create this sense of unnecessary repetition and were likely much easier for contemporary readers to process smoothly. Nor are the glosses present to clarify the meanings of ambiguous hangül words, as most of them are repeated again and again, long after the connection between a given hangül word and its corresponding hanja should be clear. What at first presents itself as a clarifying hanja translation of a potentially confusing hangül text becomes a confusing nuisance in itself.



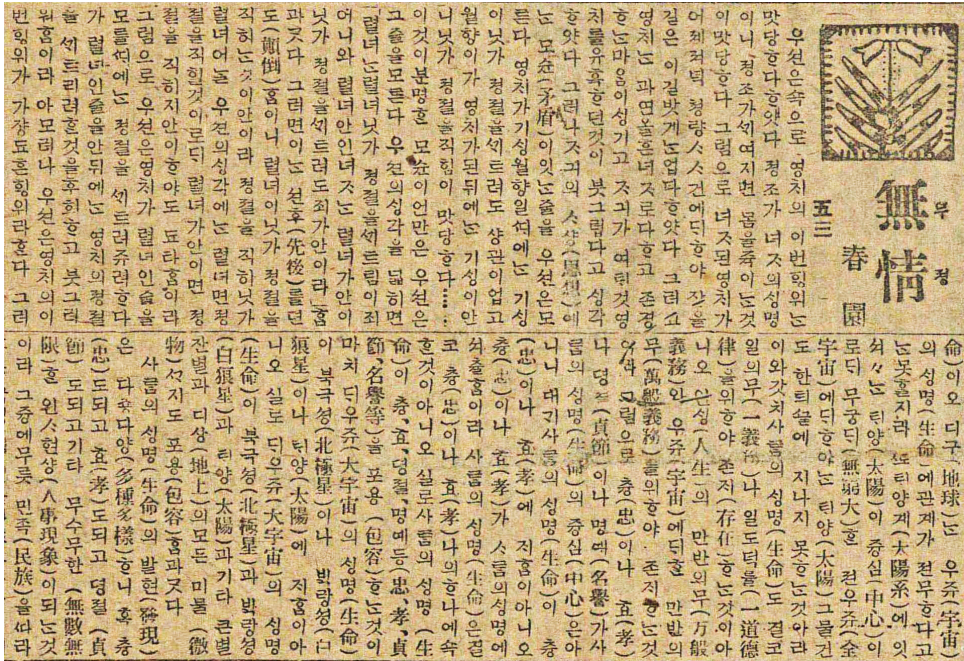


FIGURE 1. 53rd Installment of *Mujŏng* (Maeil Sinbo, 1917).

The translating presence begins to distance itself from or even do battle with the narrating voice, creating its own story at the visual level of the text.

By interrupting the flow of the hangŭl-only prose, these sinographic glosses do not simply hybridize the text but actually expose the inherent hybridity of the ostensibly simple hangŭl text itself. This process is clearest with reference to the final line of the installment, which compares Hyŏngsik's line of thinking with Usŏn's, characterizing them as follows: "One man was English-style and the other was Chinese-style" [하나는 영문식 (英文式) 이요, 하나는 한문식 (漢文式) 이다] (no. 53). To reiterate, even though the "English-style" thought of Hyŏngsik is presumably favored, the narrative endorses both as bases for judging Yŏngch'a'e actions. What is highlighted by the particular textual representation of "English-style" and "Chinese-style"—written in hangŭl as 영문식 and 한문식, respectively, and then repeated in the corresponding sinographs (英文式, 漢文式)—is that at the linguistic level, neither can be separated from the other. Hyŏngsik's "English-style" thought can appear only in the hanja-derived language of translated English mediated by Japanese. In fact, we could just as easily assume these sinographic glosses are Japanese kanji as Korean hanja. The point is that the language to which they belong is undecidable—they represent translations of English and other Western languages as well as Japanese and Chinese

in a way that makes the languages impossible to disentangle. This admixture is violently drawn out into the queer space of the parentheses, just as Yŏngch'ae's blood is drawn out from inside her body. This linguistic queering exposes the impossibility of the demands on the language of the text just as it points toward the contradictions and overlaps between "English-style" and "Chinese-style" demands on Yŏngch'ae's sexuality.

Furthermore, the 文 or 문 (mun) in *Yŏngmunsik* and *Hanmunsik*, which I have been translating as "English-style" and "Chinese-style" respectively, implies that the two philosophical "styles" in question are rooted in English and Chinese *writing* in particular. This installment, as essentially an essay on the ethical conundrum facing Yŏngch'ae in this moment, suggests that Yi saw experiments in written style as potentially enabling of not only new thought, but also new ethics. Something about the ethical quandary specifically made him or his editors decide it could not be expressed in pure vernacular style. This breakdown in the coherence of the language through the doubling of so many words makes this passage impossible to read as "pure" anything. The incoherence, the disruption, the deviance are what enables the ethical orientation it allows, or perhaps forces, its reader to feel.

In both cases, the unruly translator of the episode 53 interlude and Yŏngch'ae's furious blood-spraying specter, as queer figures, unravel the impossibilities and contradictions in the demands made by competing and overlapping normative systems. Both the language of the novel and the sexualities it describes are overdetermined by this network of norms, but the queer or incoherent presences that "come out" within them begin to move toward positionalities that reconfigure these structures.

#### MISRECOGNITION, CODE-SWITCHING, AND THE PERFORMATIVITY OF LITERARY STYLE

In addition to the breakdown and overt incoherence of the prose in episode 53, *Mujŏng* anticipates one of the hallmarks of texts more straightforwardly included within the framework of Zainichi literature, in that it attempts to represent in text the multilingual world its characters inhabit. These characters occasionally code-switch, necessitating the mixture of Japanese and English in various forms into the already experimental (and sometimes unstable) Korean text. The transliteration and translation that occur in these moments can also be read as having a queering function, especially in juxtaposition with the novel's frequent depictions of characters performing or embodying other identities. These transitions and their resultant misrecognitions once again draw our attention to the ethical and relational nature of recognition in the first place.

For instance, on her way to Pyongyang to commit suicide, Yŏngch'ae dresses and styles her hair in the manner of a student, a disguise she uses



throughout the novel to avoid the shame and often violence associated with being recognized as a *kisaeng*. On the train, she meets Pyŏng'uk, a Korean woman on break from studying in Tokyo. Kwŏn Podŭrae discusses this meeting in terms of their mutual "misrecognition": Pyŏng'uk assumes that Yŏngch'ae is a student and asks her if she is also on break, whereas Yŏngch'ae wonders to herself "how a Japanese woman could speak Korean so well" (no. 88). According to Kwŏn, this misrecognition occurs because "Yŏngch'ae and Pyŏng'uk meet when both of their outfits are functioning as false signs [*chal mot toen kiho*]."<sup>26</sup> Moreover, the "misrecognition" that Kwŏn describes is an indication of their successful passing, whereas Yŏngch'ae's previous attempts to pass have met with suspicion and ultimately recognition.

In this case, Yŏngch'ae reveals of her own accord that she is not a student without Pyŏng'uk ever suspecting as much. On the other hand, Yŏngch'ae immediately corrects her own misrecognition of Pyŏng'uk as Japanese without any hint from the latter: "[Pyŏng'uk] spoke Korean so well that Yŏngch'ae realized she must be a Korean woman studying in Japan" (no. 88). Yŏngch'ae's initial misapprehension and immediate correction is consistent with other examples of ethnic coding on clothing in the novel. As Kwŏn points out, readers are trained to recognize the *hisashigami* hairstyle as code for student in the case of Sŏnhyŏng, only to see that code garbled when Yŏngch'ae (decidedly not a student) appears with the same hairstyle.<sup>27</sup> In the same way, readers are taught prior to encountering Pyŏng'uk in Japanese clothing that different ethnic styles of dress can be read as codes for the ethnic identities of their wearers.

As a result, Pyŏng'uk is misidentified when she engages in ethnic cross-dressing, but as noted above, the confusion is quickly cleared up, and her Korean identity reaffirmed. Notably, it is spoken language that reveals Pyŏng'uk's true ethnic identity. Still, the connection of Pyŏng'uk's identity to the language she uses takes on a similar structure to that configuring the relationship of gender identity to its presentation in the form of clothing and hairstyle. That is, the text establishes language use as a more or less unquestioned sign that indicates to Yŏngch'ae that Pyŏng'uk is not Japanese but in fact Korean, but at the same time it allows the misrecognition to occur despite Pyŏng'uk's use of the Korean language from the outset.

This contradiction presents itself in *Mujŏng* not only in terms of language use but also in terms of naming. Characters adopt names in order to take on different roles, identities, and positions. In Pyŏng'uk's case, her choice of name is linked explicitly to perceived masculinity versus femininity. Here is the first mention of Pyŏng'uk's name, appearing after she has already comforted Yŏngch'ae on the train and insisted on taking her to her parents' home:

The woman student's name was Pyŏng'uk. According to Pyŏng'uk, her name had been Pyŏng'ok at first, but she had changed it to Pyŏngmok because she thought

Pyŏng'ok seemed too soft and feminine. 'Pyŏngmok,' though, was a bit too strong and masculine, so she made her name Pyŏng'uk instead, which seemed to be somewhere in between the other two names.

'Pyŏng'uk is a lonely name, isn't it?' she said to Yŏngch'ae once. 'I don't want to have to be quiet and soft as required of women by traditional thought. Nor do I want to be quite as strong and stiff as a man either. I think somewhere in between is just right.'

'Yŏngch'ae,' she said smiling. 'Yŏngch'ae. That is a pretty name.' At home, though, she was called Pyŏng'ok, not Pyŏng'uk. She would still answer when they called her by the name Pyŏng'ok (no. 91).

This passage provides an excellent illustration of how gender norms function in general. It is especially clear in English translation, for a reader without any knowledge of the underlying Korean or the sinographs from which these names are derived, that there cannot possibly be anything masculine or feminine about these sets of sounds. "Pyŏng'ok" and "Pyŏngmok" can only become feminine and masculine, respectively, within an already extant system of signs and values. Of course, in the time and place of *Mujŏng*'s initial publication, the femininity and masculinity of the names would have seemed more obvious or even natural, but the character *ok* (玉) is no more immutably tied to the notion of femininity than the sound "ok." Both signs can only be interpreted within an existing code of gender norms or language—they are literally just discourse.

Furthermore, in the translation of the novel's text—which represents the name in hangŭl, which in turn represents a set of sinographs (imagined in the minds of readers with sinographic literacy and likely written down by Yi in his original mixed-script draft of the novel)—as well as in Pyŏng'uk's multiple name substitutions, we can see the same kind of queer layering of dissonant signs. These layers of representation with no fixed core may serve as a functional metaphor for the ethics of identification. Pyŏng'uk is free in some sense to choose her name, and she switches among several options before landing on Pyŏng'uk, which she seems to feel best represents her identity. Nevertheless, she cannot escape her original name (deadname?), which was chosen for her by others. When she is at home, her relatives still insist on the name they gave her rather than the one she has given herself. Hence, the success of Pyŏng'uk's renaming depends on the spaces she occupies and the others with whom she interacts. The difference between her successful passing as Pyŏng'uk—or becoming Pyŏng'uk—outside the home and the restriction of her name choice inside her home has less to do with any potential gap between the label "Pyŏng'uk" and the characteristics of the real person it represents (which, again, is mediated by never-ending layers of signs) than with the willingness of those around her to accept the identity she presents.

With this queering of identity in mind, I would like to return to the issue of style in *Mujŏng*, particularly the project of representing the novel in hangŭl. Just as the novel's project of (re)presenting heteronormative identities is disrupted

by transitions in those identities, its project of pioneering a hangŭl style as normative modern vernacular is disrupted by code-switching. The character Sin Usŏn is especially prone to mixing Japanese into his speech, which, when represented in hangŭl, queers the language of the text as a whole, not simply the linguistically hybrid lines spoken by Usŏn and other bilingual characters. That is, just as in Judith Butler's reading of drag as queering gender norms by exposing the lack of substance beneath the performance of such norms, the transliteration of foreign words into hangŭl has the potential to expose the foreignness of even the Korean words the hangŭl is supposed to represent unproblematically.<sup>28</sup>

For a concrete example, we need read no further than the first installment of *Mujŏng*, in which Usŏn mixes both English and Japanese into his speech as he converses with Hyŏngsik. These instances of code-switching are punctuated with dots that emphasize them for the reader in the manner of boldface or italics in English print matter. In the first such instance, Usŏn addresses Hyŏngsik as "Mister Yi" (Misŭtŏ Ri, 미스터 리).<sup>29</sup> This, like many of the moments when Usŏn code-switches in conversation with Hyŏngsik, instantly places the two of them in a shared space. It establishes the two characters as sharing a certain background, with enough education to have been exposed to English and Japanese—in this case, almost certainly an experience of studying abroad in Japan. The attachment of this kind of language to Hyŏngsik as a term of address even *identifies* him as belonging to this particular social space, in the way that Pyŏng'uk's names place her into specific spaces.

Later in the installment, Usŏn starts to mix Japanese words into his speech. First, when Hyŏngsik announces that he is on his way to meet a girl, Usŏn responds with the Japanese "omedetō," transliterated into hangŭl as "omedettoo" (오메테또오) and without a gloss explaining the meaning of the term (congratulations). In this moment, the reader too is brought into the space that Usŏn and Hyŏngsik occupy through their shared knowledge of Japanese, assuming that the reader also has this knowledge. Usŏn follows this congratulatory remark by commenting that the girl must be Hyŏngsik's betrothed, employing the Japanese term "iinazuke," represented in hangŭl as "iinajŭkē" (이이나즈케). In this case, however, "iinajŭkē" is followed by a parenthetical explanation of its meaning: "yakhonhan saram" (약혼한 사람), "person to whom one is engaged." As we observed with episode 53, these parentheses mark off a queer space that intervenes in the main text, disrupting the vernacular representation with extra information not necessarily generated by the narrating voice. "iinajŭkē" (이이나즈케) represents the sounds of a Japanese word (許嫁/いいなづけ), pronounced orally in the world of the story, whereas "yakhonhan saram" (약혼한 사람) glosses these sounds with semantic information in Korean. However, even as the parentheses attempt to separate the two into different spheres of labor—one phonetic, one semantic—they still share the same presentation in hangŭl signs, which carry both semantic and phonetic information at once.

In other words, the Japanese characters that would typically represent Japanese words are covered over by hangŭl in the process of transliteration: a kind of linguistic drag. A word that is ostensibly Japanese beneath the surface is presented as Korean, at least in its textual appearance. As with other cases of misrecognition in the novel, what is beneath the surface is at once concealed and readily apparent—in some cases even marked for emphasis. The hangŭl characters here are presented in the same fashion as Korean words, while never denying their non-Korean identity. However, queering the oral/phonetic/Japanese versus textual/semantic/Korean dichotomy allows us to view the hangŭl within the parentheses as likewise misrecognized insofar as it is presented as strictly Korean. The *yakhon* in the explanation of the meaning is derived from a sinographic word, its foreign origins no less apparent to the presumably educated reader. Of course, this kind of borrowed vocabulary, the two-character sinographic compound, has been so thoroughly domesticated as to become a part of the fabric of the Korean language itself. The point is that this fabric is always already multilingual, even if the hangŭl-only style of Yi's text masks its inherent hybridity.

In fact, in this installment we see native Korean, Sino-Korean, Japanese, and English words all represented in hangŭl. Their origins are apparent to certain readers in certain knowledge spaces, and yet it is impossible to schematize their differences without prior knowledge independent of the text at hand and the strictly visual signs it has to offer. The normative logic that sorts words into Japanese or Korean provenance presumes a particular national-linguistic essence prior to its visual representation within the hangŭl text, and yet that essence can never present itself without such a visual sign. In terms of gender, this is performativity. The dressing of "other" signs in hangŭl transliteration parodically ruptures the link between presentation and identity, exposing the incoherence embedded in normative style.

. . .

The novel ends with all of the central characters coincidentally convening on the same train. The train's terminal station is ambiguous but also irrelevant: for all of the characters, their ultimate destination (education in Tokyo or the United States) cannot be reached via train. Better yet, the destination is not a place but rather a time—their own personal futures as well as the Korea of the future that they will help build as its most privileged and educated subjects. At both the personal and national levels, that future is reached via the West (in this case the United States), which is in turn reached via Japan. The train's journey from rural Korea to Seoul and then on to even more civilized destinations reflects a journey through an imperial timeline, revealing the recursive structure of violence and colonization that renders each stop in the journey temporally behind the stop that follows.<sup>30</sup>

As Ellie Choi writes, this journey is useful "as a spatial framework to understand how the traumatic experience of modernity for colonized Korea necessitated

the reinvention of tradition and history towards a stabilizing ‘ethnic national’ identity.”<sup>31</sup> In other words, the construction of an ethnonation is inseparable from the situation of Korea within a spatiotemporal framework set up by imperialism—or rather, multiple intersecting imperialisms. In the final installments of *Mujöng*, this “traumatic experience of modernity” and the burgeoning ethnocentrism it induces are not only highly visible but also tangled up with heteronormative romance, as travel becomes the setting for resolving the romantic triangle(s) central to the plot. In the end, everyone involved settles neatly into normative gender roles and relationships, and is simultaneously integrated into a global capitalist teleology, committed to pursuing progress for the Korean nation.

In the same way that its unruly characters are eventually disciplined into proper (gendered) national subjects, *Mujöng* has been embraced by the standard historiography of modern Korean literature, despite whatever queerness it embodies.<sup>32</sup> That the queer elements of the novel could be explained away or even co-opted by normative narratives of Korean literary modernity is indicative of just how difficult it is to resist such a working alliance of norms, even when (or especially because) it is internally contradictory. At the same time, the accommodation of *Mujöng*’s queer elements within the canon of modern Korean literature also points to the possibility of reconfiguring incoherence into coherence, and perhaps even vice versa.