Challenge to Confucian Values in Modern Novels: *The Heartless* 無情 and *The Three Generations* 三代[1]

Sang Tae Kim

1

Built around its central virtue known variously as "benevolence" or "humanity" (仁), Confucianism stressed practical ethics in the life here and now. As the teaching paid scanty attention to afterlife, there are those – particularly those attuned to Christianity – who feel reluctant to regard to it as a religion. One can nevertheless make a case for Confucianism as a religion in that it represents a way of life and that maxims attributed to the sage Confucius carry as much weight as tenets of a revealed religion.

"Cultivate one's own self, regulate one's family, govern the state rightly, and make the whole world (kingdom) peaceful and tranquil (修身齊家治國平天下).[2] Thus an oft-cited saying aptly sums up Confucian philosophy. Followers of Confucius were supposed to regulate human relations according to a code involving the three major bonds (三綱) – sovereign and subject, father and son, and man and wife (君爲臣綱，父爲子綱，夫爲婦綱); this code further dwells on five relationships (五倫): affection between father and son, loyalty between sovereign and subject, proper division of function between husband and wife, precedence of senior over junior, and faithfulness between friends (父子有親，君臣有義，父婦有別，長幼有序，朋友有信).[3]

A small group of scholars around the middle of Yi Korea, the last dynasty (1392-1910) attempted to reorient Confucian scholarship in the direction of more practical aspects of life and away from the theoretical

and abstract.[4] Then in 1884, the Korean government, under increasing pressure from Japan, undertook extensive reforms on western models ranging widely over government structure, education and individuals' daily life. Only then did Confucian teachings and practices come in for sharp questioning. Naturally there were pointed reactions. I will name one such instance. Nineteenth-century Korean men still kept their hair long and tied it into a knot on top of the head.[5] When the government ordered hair knots removed and hair kept shorter, many Confucian scholars cited from the *Hsiao-ching*, or *Classic of Filial Piety*: "Our bodies – to every hair and bit of skin – are received from our parents, and we must not dare to injure or wound them: this is the beginning of filial piety (身體髮膚受之父母不敢毀傷孝之始也).[6]

Total dedication to fillial piety tended to discourage initiative and enterprise. This duty to parents was so strong that during the Japanese invasion of the last century one field commander of volunteer troops abandoned his post in the heat of battle to hurry home to bury his father with proper ceremony, who had just passed away.[7] Loyalty, another major virtue, was supposed to be reciprocal As the subject should be loyal to the sovereign, so should the sovereign serve the subject. Nevertheless, loyalty to the throne was often stressed to the exclusion of a sovereign's loyalty to subjects or state. For example, during the 17th-century invasion of Ch'ing China, the king and his court fled to the safety of the Kanghwa Island, leaving the people to defend themselves.[8] Towards the end of the Yi dynasty in Korea, there was an insurrection as desperate people protested injustice and unfair taxation. Far from heeding popular grievances, the king sought assistance from Japan and the insurrection was finally put down by Japanese troops.[9] Thirdly, since the relationship of man and wife was defined only in terms of different duties and since the male always enjoyed precedence over the female, women were totally deprived of opportunity to develope their potentials, much less of any chance for social advancement.

2

It is the "negative" aspect of Confucianism that novels of modern Korea point to earnestly urging reform. Yi Kwang-su (1892-1971?) attacks the philosophy and values of Confucianism and argues for modern education as an effective counter-measure to obsolete convention. By modern education he means an education modeled on Western patterns based on

scientific thinking and as against conventional education which consisted exclusively of studying Confucian classics. Yi Kwang-su was not the first writer to argue for such reforms. For a decade or so before him nearly all Korean novelists had called for changes: gain national independence, build democracy, establish egalitarian society, adopt western institutions, drop superstition.[11] However, their critique of Confucianism often missed the point, and their understanding of western civilization was rather limited as well as superficial. Yi Kwang-su, the foremost novelist of his time, saw more clearly the essence of western civilization as well as the weakness of Confucian values. And his work had higher literary qualities, hence the greater was his influence.

Yi Kwang-su's *The Heartless* describes Hyŏng-sik, a young man swept into the turbulance of two conflicting orders, the old and new. He is caught between two young women representing two different value systems. Hyŏng-sik is strongly skeptical about Confucian morality. As a graduate from a Japanese college, he was a top intellectual of his day – for Korea had no college and only a handful of college graduates.

The story turns as he is visited by Yŏng-ch'ae, a woman he last saw some ten years before. She is a public entertainer (妓生; as distinguished from a prostitute). Her father was in prison on false charges. She sold herself in order to rescue her father. Public entertainer as she is, she still kept herself ready for Hyŏng-sik. For she had been told by her father she was to marry him when she grew up. Hyŏng-sik himself remembers hearing from her father that she was meant for him. Even without such arrangement her father being a benefactor to him, he feels under obligation to marry his daughter. The obligation is felt more urgently yet as she is helpless.

Then enters another young woman Sŏn-hyŏng, good-looking, with modern schooling, and with a rich father. A choice confronts him: which to choose between obligation and advantage? Fulfill the obligation, and he has to pick Yŏng-ch'ae. But he decides to go the way of personal advantage.

Meantime a rake takes liberty with Yŏng-ch'ae. She heads north by train leaving behind a suicide note: now that she lost what she had kept for Hyŏng-sik, she could not bring herself to face him. Whereupon Hyŏng-sik no longer hesitates to choose Sŏn-hyŏng.

On the train Yong-ch'ae meets Pyŏng-uk, a girl student attending a college in Japan. Her view of marriage is one based on mutual love. She hears what Yŏng-ch'ae is about to do and asks her, "Do you still love him?"

The question disconcerts her, for she figures marriage is something arranged by the parents who pick the marriage partner. Picking your own partner is unconscionable under received morality, for doing so would simply be unfilial. Talk of love before marriage is out of the question. Pyŏng-uk goes a step further and discourses on the dignity of the individual and equality of the sexes. Conversation between the two women with disparate outlook has the following iridescence:

> "I take it that at just a word from your parents you made a decision for life."
>
> "Yes. After all, a woman is to obey her parents, then her husband, and when he dies her son . . . don't you?"
>
> "Indeed! Do you realize how many women have ruined their lives because of this rule of triple obedience (三從之道), and how many women have been made miserable? The daughter should mind her parents and the wife should do what her husband says. But doesn't her own life matter more than her husband's desire? To give your life over to meeting someone else's wishes! That's death. Once a woman was required to die following her husband who just passed away. But what tyranny! You've been a slave to such outworn ideas. Wake up and be free."[13]

Yŏng-ch'ae sees the light. In old tales Confucius reigned supreme, and should a woman lose chastity she would have to end her own life to be true to her husband. To such a "martyr" for her husband, a red gate was set up to mark her high virtue. There was no more of that for Yŏng-ch'ae. The new morality breaks with Confucianism in its view. Under the westernized code, love is what makes marriage. One does not marry to return a favor, or to defer to one's parents, or even to have a child. Marriage is built on love and love only. This is also a renunciation of the injunction that the wife should follow her husband's initiative, for free love is predicated on equality between man and woman. This is an end to patriarchal rule over woman, to woman's subordination to man.

In his essays, Yi Kwang-su more roundly attacked some outdated Confucian conventions. Irate Confucian scholars denounced him to the government and circulated among fellow adherents an exhortation never to read him. But one should not overlook a somewhat less noticeable fact in the novel under discussion: Yi Kwang-su is not unmindful of the more

affirmative aspects of Confucian doctrine, as shown by the sympathy with which he describes Yŏng-ch'ae's conventional beliefs and deeds.

3

In another story, *The Three Generations* 三代, published in 1931 by Yŏm Sang-sŏp (1897-1960), we meet a diehard conservative, his son fairly committed to modernization, and his grandson who is more moderate in view and tries to get along the best he can under the circumstances.

At this time Korea has fallen into the clutches of imperial Japan, and waves of rapid change swirl around the three generations. The grandfather, Mr. Cho, makes three serious mistakes. First, for a great sum of money he buys a nominal government position without duties; he now calls himself "councilor" (議官), and wears a jade piece on his hat (玉貫子) to show his official rank. Second, he elevates his concubine to the place vacated by his recently deceased wife; he hopes to have a son by her to supplant his son whom he loathes. Third, he takes over the compilation of the genealogy of another family belonging to the same clan scheming to squeeze his family name into their illustrious lineage which included many high officials; this time he spends ten times as much money.

He is convinced that these shenanigans are to fulfill his filial duties, enhancing the honor and prestige of his family. His first and third undertakings are quite in line with what the *Hsiao-ching* prescribes: "When we have established our human character by the practice of ethical duties, and make our family name known in future ages, and thereby glorify our parents – this is the *end of filial piety* (立身行道揚名於後世以顯父母, 孝之終也).[14]

According to Hyŏn Sang-yun, a historian and educator, family-centered thinking and reverence of names – family or otherwise – are the worst of abuses of Confucian conventions.[15] Overemphasis on fillal piety has tended to set such store by family and family honors at the neglect of society and state as a whole. To bring honor to the family, one would not hesitate to buy a government post – even a purely nominal one or to forge a genealogy.

Mr. Cho's son for his part embraces Christian values and is amenable to modern ways of life and thought. He soon loses his bearings, however, in the sea change that comes with Japan's occupation of Korea. He opposes his father's expensive schemes, saying he should donate the money toward the building of a school or a church. Such contradictions, in his father's

view, make him an utterly unworthy and unfilial son. What outrages the father even more is that his son refuses to hold memorial services or bow before the ancestral tablets – a ritual to the code of filial piety. But the son is following foreign missionaries, who forbid, as a form of idolatry, all these rituals. The old councilor accordingly deals his son out of his will and decides to leave his fortune to his grandson.

Mr. Cho's grandson, Tok-ki, takes the middle line, trying to mediate between grandfather and father. Although he sees both sides of the case, he faults his grandfather for blithely ignoring all changes in the world and clinging doggedly to the old system of morality and values. Nor does his father's approach please him, for he opposes an unconditional rejection of everything traditional.

But while this novel concedes certain positive points in the old order, the author is scathingly critical of its failings. At the same time he weighs values of the new era for what they are worth.

4

Today more than three score years have passed since *The Heartless* was published, tracing the decline of Confucian values. Are those values completely gone from the scene? No, indeed. Those who strongly repudiate a system are almost always those who strongly partake of it, grudgingly or otherwise. So powerful was Confucian influence that both these modern novels were obliged to take a stand against it. Contemporary fiction, it may well be said, shows a certain fondness for lingering over an old order fading into the past. Confucianism has acquired a nostalgic glow.

As western influence continues to affect Korean society, one gets the impression that Confucian ceremonies and habits are disappearing. As always, the older generation deplores the ways of the rising generation. But the old ways are not disappearing altogether; instead, Confucian thought is receding under the surface to form an undercurrent. It is widely accepted among literary critics that literature concerns itself more with what lies beneath than what is on the surface. No one can deny, then, the Confucian thought is still a viable force in Korean life and literature.

Notes

1. *The Heartless* 無情 was originally published serially in the *TaehanMaeilshinbo*

(大韓每日申報) 126 times in 1917. The text quoted in this paper is from *Yi Kwang-Su's Complete Works*, Vol. 1 李光洙全集, 一卷 (三中堂, 1971). *The Three Generations* 三代 was published serially in the *Chosunilbo* (朝鮮日報) 215 times in 1931. The text quoted is from *Yom Sang-Sop's Complete Works*, Vol. 4 想涉全集, 四卷 (民音社, 1987).

2. This phrase was quoted from chapter four of *Ta-hsüeh* 大學 四節 which includes the following:

   先致其國者先齊其家欲齊其家者先齊其身欲齊其身者先正其心欲正其心者先誠其意欲誠其意者先致其知致知在格物

   Cf. James Legge, tr., *The Great Learning*, Ch. 4, in *The Chinese Classics: With a Translation, Critical and Exegetical Notes, Prolegomena, and Copious Indexes*, 3rd ed, Vol. 5 (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1960), pp. 357-8. This phrase is very well known in Korea nowadays as well as during the Yi Dynasty.

3. The three major bonds and five ethical relationships (三綱五倫) were popularly practiced during the Yi dynasty as the basic ethical principles. The origin of this phrase came from the theory of three major bonds and five ethical constances (三綱五常), which was delivered by the famous Confucian scholar Tung Chung-shu (董仲舒), who adopted his principles from the teachings of Confucius and Mencius. See "Samgang-oryun," (三綱五倫) *Tong-A World Encyclopedia* 東亞原色百科事典 (Seoul: Tong-a Publishing Co., 1983), p. 227.
4. A kind of New Confucianism, which is known as Shilhak (實學) in Korea. There were a few Confucian scholars who attempted to reorient traditional Confucianism during the 17 cent. ~19 cent. in the direction of practical ways. See, Yun Sasun, "Philosophical Basis of Practical Confucianism" 實學의基礎, Yun Sasun & Ko Ikjin eds., *The Thought of Korea* 韓國의思想 (Seoul: Yolomsa, 1984), pp. 68-74.
5. Many Koreans violently refused having their hair cut during the time. Cf., 李宣根, 韓民族國難克服史, (徽文出版社, 1978), pp. 68-90; 黃玹 (1833-1906), 梅泉野錄, 二卷, 建陽 元年 丙申條 Cf., 李錫浩編輯, 李章熙譯, 梅泉野錄 (大洋書籍, 1973), p. 201.
6. 孝經 開宗明義篇
7. The commander was Yi In-young (李鄰榮 ?-1907), who raised volunteer soldiers (義兵) to resist Japanese occupation in 1885. In 1905 he again raised volunteer soldiers to fight Japanese troops. However, when he heard the demise of his father, he had his adjunct take over his position as commander, and went home to conduct a funeral ceremony according to Confucian decorum. Shortly after that, he was captured by Japanese troops and was excuted in 1907. Yi Hong-jik (李弘植), ed., "Yi In-young," *A New Encyclopedia of Korean History* 新國史辭典 (Kyohaksa, 1983), pp. 1096-7.
8. Houchin (後金, later changed the name of the country into Ch'ing 淸) invaded Korea during the Yi dynasty in 1627 for the reason that Korea took the side of Ming (明) against Ch'ing. The Korean king and his subjects sought shelter in Kwanghwa Island, abandoning the rest of the country to the enemy. This event was called Chungmyohoran (丁卯胡亂). Yi Sun-goen, op. cit., pp. 471-3 & Lee Hong-jik, op. cit., pp. 1185-6.
9. One of the examples was the insurrection of Tonghak (東學) followers, in 1894, who consisted mainly of farmers. They protested against the corruption of

bureacrats, and powerful Japanese influence upon the Korean government. In the beginning, they seemed strong enough to defeat government troops. However, they were poorly equipped and badly organized. Finally defeated by the allied troops of Korea and Japan, they were suppressed ruthlessly. Cf., *A History of Anti-Japanese Volunteer Troops* 抗日義兵史 (The Compilation Committee of Korean History of Anti-Japanese Volunteer Troops, 1970), pp. 107-17.

10. *Yi Kwang-su's Complete Works*, Vol. 10, passim.
11. Yi Byong-gi (李秉岐) & Paek Chul (白鐵), *A History of Korean Literature* 國文學全史 (新丘文化社, 1960), pp. 242-50.
12. Op. cit., Vol. 1, p. 153.
13. Ibid., 155.
14. *Hsiao-ching* (孝經), loc. cit.
15. Hyon Sang-yun (玄相允), *A History of Korean Confucianism* 朝鮮儒學史 (Seoul: Minjungsokwan, 1977), pp. 396-7.