

# *Creative Women of Korea*

The Fifteenth Through the Twentieth Centuries

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and Beyond)<sup>3</sup> in 1974. The latter is a posthumously published two-volume collection of her *ŭnsa* (vocation master), Iryöp sūnim. Wōlsōng sūnim went on, "She is truly a rare person not just in Korean history but in human history. She succeeded in organizing and ordering her spiritual life and thus succeeded in life itself. But it's a shame, so little is known about her after she joined the order."

Thus began our four-hour conversation, during which we didn't even stop to eat, in the coffee shop of the hotel in the village famous for hot springs. The six gray-robed nuns and I were the last customers when the café was closed at 11 P.M. I had asked all kinds of questions, quite boldly, I might add, including one about the existence of Iryöp sūnim's son, the artist-monk Ildang,<sup>4</sup> whom my husband and I visited the day before at Chikjisa, Kimch'ŏn, Kyōngsang Pukdo. Wōlsōng and Chōngjin sūnim answered them frankly without any apparent attempt at deception while the four novitiates listened intently.<sup>5</sup> At the end of four hours, Wōlsōng sūnim presented me the first of the above-mentioned two volumes, which were out of print. Upon seeing the six gray-robed women on a warm summer night in southern Korea, I became convinced of the value of my subject matter, and any doubts I had about the appropriateness of this paper's title was dispelled. I came to realize that Iryöp sūnim succeeded in overcoming life's conflicts by the end of her life. She devoted all of her Buddhist-period writing to spreading Buddhist teaching, which she considered as containing the ultimate secret of human life. This piece, therefore, despite its title, is not about the conflicting worlds of Kim Iryöp, but of how she succeeded in reconciling them.

### Introduction

Kim Iryöp (1896–1971) was a prominent pioneering figure at the dawn of modern Korea. She was a feminist writer, an essayist, a poet, and a Buddhist nun. In her lifetime of seventy-five years, she wrote fifty-eight poems, sixteen novellas, and countless essays and reflective short pieces. Based on the sheer quantity of her writing alone, she should have been taken more seriously as a writer than has been the case. But her influence in modern Korean literature is not as great as her reputation (or notoriety). And many literary critics did not include her among the noted writers of the early twentieth century. Sōng Rakhūi suggested three reasons for Kim Iryöp's exclusion from the literary circle: that Kim Iryöp's writing was didactic; that she was a female; and that she became a nun.<sup>6</sup>



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# Kim Iryöp's Conflicting Worlds

Bonnie B.C. Oh

### Preface

"Are you sure you are interested in studying Iryöp no sūnim's life after she entered the mountain?" a gray-robed, tall woman, with a powerful face and tansured head, asked incredulously when I met her at a hotel coffee shop on a late June evening in the village of Tōksan near the monastery of Sudōksa. The woman asking the question was Wōlsōng (*sūnim*).<sup>1</sup> Kim Iryöp's *pōpson* (lit. "grandson" in Buddhist tradition), a disciple. Wōlsōng sūnim was with another nun, Chōngjin, also a *pōpson*, and four other novitiates. Disbelieving that someone from America should be interested in the deceased old nun, but nevertheless overjoyed, Wōlsōng sūnim continued: "We are so glad and grateful that you are interested in Iryöp *no-sūnim* ('old nun')." We have always believed that she deserved a serious study. She is too significant a figure in recent Korean history to be forgotten.<sup>2</sup> Wōlsōng and Chōngjin were two of Kim Iryöp's closest associates and disciples during her years at Sudōksa. Wōlsōng sūnim, who just turned sixty this year, did graduate work at Tong'guk University (a university of Sōn Buddhism) in Seoul, and also in Japan, and edited, compiled, and published *Ōnū sudoin ui hoesang* (Recollections of a Certain Nun) in 1960 and *Miraese ka tahago namtorok* (Until the End of the Future World

Kim Iryöp wrote with messages on life's meanings even before she joined the religious order, and her writing was not considered pure literature.<sup>7</sup> As such, it did not sit well with her contemporary writers who advocated "art for art's sake" in 1920s Korea, partly as an escape from Japanese persecution.<sup>8</sup> Then, she was not just a writer, but a female writer who attempted to promote women's rights, to raise women's consciousness, and to reform past and contemporary abusive customs affecting women of Korea, which threatened to disrupt men's lives. She even practiced what she preached by leading an unconventional lifestyle that was considered scandalous.<sup>9</sup> In an age with so few professional women, early female artists were seen through the colored prisms of men, who slandered them after earlier having encouraged them. Kim Tong In, one of the best-known writers of the time, even wrote a caricature, *Kim Yönsil chôn* (Life of Kim Yönsil). It was a collective, satirical, condescending, and defamatory rendering of the lives of three prominent artistic women: Na Hyesök, the artist, Yun Simdök, the singer, and Kim Iryöp, the writer. Then, suddenly and sensationally, Kim Iryöp dropped out of the world and "entered the mountain (*ipsan*)"<sup>10</sup> to become a nun of Sön (Zen in Japanese) Buddhism and stopped publishing for thirty-one years.

Whatever others might have thought, however, Kim Iryöp considered herself a writer, particularly a poet, before she became a nun, and writing was an important part of her life even after she joined the Buddhist order. But she always wrote with messages on life's meanings in mind and did not concern herself with critics. Much like Han Yongün, a writer/reformer monk who might have been a role model for her, Kim stood apart from the Korean literary scene, a sort of stranger, an outsider, to the circle known for its close-knit exclusiveness of dilettante devotees of art for art's sake, who pretended to be oblivious to the world around them.<sup>11</sup> To her contemporaries, she was perhaps their most unusual feminist—one who turned Buddhist nun and, after being a reformer, then a writer, and an occasional one at that. Obviously such an iconoclast could not be considered a serious writer. As a writer, she was a loner left to do whatever she pleased. No serious writer would write in so many different genres—essays, poetry, novellas, and random recollections. She simply did not fit in with other literary figures.

Kim Iryöp's pre-Buddhist life represented a paradigm of the first generation of women intellectuals of Korea. She was outspoken against social ills, led an unusual life, and was ostracized by society, but she ultimately overcame criticisms, unlike two of her close friends, artist

Na Hye Sök and novelist Kim Yönsil, and survived to be admired as a great woman, perhaps by becoming Buddhist clergy. I have written and published about Kim Iryöp as a feminist and as a pioneer reformer in colonial Korea—her life and work before she became a Buddhist nun in 1928 at the age of thirty-three.<sup>12</sup> This article is a sequel to my earlier work—about the later, Buddhist period of her life, a total of forty-four years. Though spanning four times the years of the earlier part of her adult life, her Buddhist phase is less known and deserves examination beyond what it generally has received.

Kim Iryöp's writing summons conflicting images to ordinary people in contemporary Korea. I was quite surprised how many people recognized her name. Many have at least heard of her. They know that she was a *sünim*, that she made Sudökka a tourist attraction in South Korea, that, in fact, it was she many tourists wanted to catch a glimpse of during her lifetime rather than the noted monastery itself, and that she died a *Sönsa*, Sön master (Zen Buddhist teacher),<sup>13</sup> the title usually reserved for an accomplished male monk. But the name, Kim Iryöp, also invokes a portrait of a bespectacled, handsome, and modern young woman, pursued by men, but ultimately lonely, forlorn, and scandalized for having failed in marriages and love affairs. Some people remember her, wrongly, only as the lover of the person who gave her the pen name, Iryöp ("one leaf"), and that individual was none other than the even more well-known and controversial "father" of modern Korean literature, Yi Kwangsu. Accompanying these contradictory sketches is a common assumption that she became a nun, as many Korean women had before, to escape and forget her disappointments in life.

It is true that she had a series of disappointing love affairs and marriages, which were rare and scandalous in 1920s Korea, and certainly they played a part. But to attribute her decision to ascend the mountain entirely to disappointing love affairs is mocking her intelligence as a modern, educated woman and that of women in general.

### Why Did Kim Iryöp Become a Buddhist Nun?

Whenever Kim Iryöp was asked her reasons for becoming a nun during her novitiate years, she would often repeat the question and then answer: "Why am I practicing Buddhism? 'Why shouldn't I?'"

Just before she made the final *ipsan* decision, she wrote a short piece entitled "Na üi norae" ("My Song").<sup>14</sup> This was a declaration of her pledge to universalize Buddhist teaching, and, in fact, a profession of why she was contemplating becoming a nun.

I sing a song.

Upon the sound of my song.

The numbers of time and limits of space disappear.

I'd like to sing a song freely,

Completely free of even the beautiful musical melodies and beats . . .  
It's not a song of love, it's not a song of sorrow, it's not even a song of inspiration.

I would simply like to sing the mysterious verse of complete ecstasy.

Then, even the decomposed soil and dried-up tree barks would be moved.

Even immovable rocks would smile.

The sound of my song would resonate throughout the wide earth . . .

I would like to sing life after life, generation after generation, to fill the universe.

Then, even those who turned deaf ears would be moved by my song.

Ah—, I would like to sing—until the future world ends and beyond—forever.

Her "song" disclosed her dream to propagate her newfound faith. It was a combination of idealistic goals, personal aspirations and an accident of fate that led an iconoclastic feminist to Buddhism: a high-minded hope to spread Buddhist teaching to save humanities, combined with her personal desire to redeem her life in order to discover self and meaning of life. Just then, an opportunity presented itself to guide her to a road she had not conceived of only a few years earlier.

In the mid-1920s, Kim was disillusioned with her life, which she viewed as filled with loneliness and suffering. After she had lost all her immediate family members, and failed in several marriages and romances—making her a rootless, drifting solitary being—she had thrown herself into various activities as a modern feminist: to writing, to reform projects and to the education of women, and to leading a life that she considered honest and true to her beliefs—the lifestyle of a liberated woman. But such a philosophy of life brought nothing but grief and notoriety. Thirty years after she became a nun, she reflected:

I do not consider my life experience (of that time) shallow. Compared with those who suffered most, it may be infinitesimal (as but "a hair of nine cows.")<sup>15</sup> But troubles and anguish of the past thirty years of my earlier life were not insignificant for my mental and physical well-being.

Even now, I have no blood relative, no one who would feel conjugal love toward me, I have no worldly possessions, neither a thatched roof hut, nor a silk garment, nor a silver ring. Nobody has a life as simple as mine. In this process of elimination of fame and wealth, I have experienced no less pain and suffering than others.<sup>16</sup>

Since she had suffered, she understood others' pains and commiserated with fellow human sufferers and hoped to do something about them. In a piece, "Puldo rül takkümyö" (While Studying the Buddhist Way), dated 1935, Kim cited her favorite passage in the 80,000-chapter *Tripitaka*.<sup>17</sup>

Human beings have countless agonies.

One must sever them—as with a knife.

If I am lucky to receive great virtue,

I wish to save millions of creatures languishing in suffering.

To save multitudes in anguish was her great wish (*taewōn*), which she wanted to accomplish above all else. If she could not attain it in this life, then in the next life, and then the next life and so on, until the future world ended and even further, "miraese ka tahago namtorok," in other words, forever.<sup>18</sup> Until such time, she would strive to achieve this goal of saving suffering humanity and at the same time finding her "self," her "great self." Only then would she succeed in attaining her goals: ending her own suffering, saving herself, and finding her true self.

An accident of fate also intervened. Kim Iryöp became involved in the 1920s with a magazine, called *Yōsi* (As Is), whose office was located across the hall from the Pulgyosa (Buddhist Publishing Company).<sup>19</sup> She became acquainted with the company staff and published several articles in the magazine, visiting the office frequently. Born and raised as a Christian, she had been taught to regard Buddhism as a superstitious cult of immoral believers, and she was hardly interested in Buddhism at that time. But when she made the staff's acquaintance through her work for the Buddhist *Yōsi*, she became impressed with their courteous demeanor, their peaceful and trustworthy appearance. She became so fond of them that, even after the magazine folded, she continued to get together with them.<sup>20</sup>

It was during this time that she met a Mr. B.,<sup>21</sup> her one and only true love, who abruptly left her in 1925(?) to become a monk, from which she never recovered. They were in touch with each other, however (albeit between

long intervals), all her life, and were informed of each other's activities.

She began learning Chinese from Master Kwon Sang No through Buddhist canons and came to realize that there was something mysteriously vast and profound in Buddhism. She began to think of learning all she could and of propagating that learning to others.<sup>22</sup> At the moment of her grief over lost love, her desire to learn more about Buddhism, her wish to find herself, and her will to save multitudes of others who were suffering—all came together. She came to the conclusion that only through Buddhism could she accomplish all of them and the writing would become her means.<sup>23</sup>

### Korean *Sōn* Buddhism and Kim Iryōp

The school Kim Iryōp joined was *Sōn* Buddhism, known for its emphasis on meditation. *Sōn*, as it is known in Korea, existed on the Korean Peninsula as early as the end of the seventh century, almost simultaneously with the beginning of its Chinese counterpart, *Ch'an*, and became a discernible force within the Korean Buddhist tradition by the end of the ninth century.<sup>24</sup> In contemporary Korea, it is called *Chogyejong*, or the Chogye school.

There are two different accounts of its origin in Korea. According to one theory, the contemporary *Sōn* tradition owes its genesis to the eminent Koryō monk, Chinul (1158–1210),<sup>25</sup> the founder of Songgwangsa, who combined *Sōn* with the doctrinal teachings of the more scholastic schools of Buddhist thought and who brought *Sōn* into the mainstream of Korean Buddhism. From this beginning, *Sōn* tradition grew to dominate Korean Buddhism.<sup>26</sup> The other explanation is that Monk Towoe established it by combining several sects during the reign of King Hyōndōk (809–26) of the unified Silla period. And, at the end of the Koryō dynasty, Monk T'aego brought further unification, moving the sect's headquarters to T'aego Temple (Susongdong, Seoul) as the center of Korean Buddhism.<sup>27</sup>

Korean *Sōn* Buddhism attained its supremacy by absorbing and summing other branches into what came to be known as the indigenous Chogye school of Korean Buddhism. *Chogye* is the Korean pronunciation of *Ts'ao-ch'i*, the name of the mountain where the sixth patriarch of Chinese Ch'an, Hui-neng, resided, adumbrating the fundamental *Sōn* stance of Korean Buddhism.<sup>28</sup>

The Korean *Sōn* Buddhist school, like Ch'an in China and Zen in Ja-

pan, emphasized meditation. As a religious practice, meditation was not peculiar to *Sōn*, but no other school attached such near-exclusive importance as *Sōn* did to meditation, not only as a method or means for intuiting Ultimate Truth, but also as an end in itself, as "the Truth realized in action."<sup>29</sup> Iryōp sūnim resonated with this doctrine and stated, "theory and doctrine are nothing but a finger pointing at true self (*pona*)," in which they exist.<sup>30</sup>

*Sōn* Buddhism believes in an intuitive approach to enlightenment, for "Buddha-nature" is inherent in the minds of all sentient beings; this nature can readily be seen through meditative introspection.<sup>31</sup> "By Buddha-nature is meant the Buddha-mind in its highest attributes and true essence, which transcends all distinctions of [...] specific characters"<sup>32</sup> and the mind that human beings have originally.<sup>33</sup> So the mind controlled the body, Iryōp sūnim believed, and "human problems can easily be solved for happiness or unhappiness is determined by one's mind."<sup>34</sup>

Initially, human beings were in the state of "greater self" (*taea*), capable of noticing this nature, of general love (*pakae*), equal love (*p'yōng-ae*), and merciful love (*chaeae*), but they had regressed to "lesser (small)-self" (*soa*) and were incapable of the love of greater self. According to Kusan, a twentieth-century Korean head monk of Song'gwangsa<sup>35</sup> who was Buswell's master, the mind also subsumed all things in existence, from one's own body, to the earth, humankind, and all the animals. The entire universe was, therefore, no different from one's own mind. The world of appearances, therefore, is but a product of the imagination. Reflecting this *Sōn* belief, Iryōp sūnim pointed out the utter futility of judging people by appearance when she alluded to the time when she was severely criticized for leaving a loveless marriage.<sup>36</sup>

Owing to its virtual omnipresence, the mind could also be called the "greater self" (*taea*). All things are in a state of interrelationship, one with the other; there was no self or soul that could be conceived separately from anything else. Hence, through *Sōn* practice the student was to realize a universal "ecology" of mind, in which "this world, mankind and all the animals are no different from oneself."<sup>37</sup> This is precisely the "greater self." And as it is not possible to separate any component from the rest of the world, both objects and the relative self cannot really exist. Therefore, the "greater self" is precisely "no-self" (*muu*).<sup>38</sup>

Because *Sōn* Buddhism believed that enlightenment was not something that needed to be attained or created but was the fundamental

element underlying everyone's existence, a person had to be taken through the process of transition—which the meditation practice provided—during which her/his true status would be revealed to her/him (self-realization). This process was necessary because the individual had so thoroughly convinced her/himself that s/he was not worthy of enlightenment.<sup>39</sup> Because one did not know that originally one was a Buddha, one could not live like a Buddha. But within oneself, there was limitless possibility, similar to a Buddha's.<sup>40</sup>

The length of time needed for self-realization might vary; some novitiates would not take their final vows for they did not feel worthy or prepared to take the final step. In other cases, an aging nun or monk would feel that her/his time was running out and would devote all available time and energy to attain or to retrieve the source of enlightenment buried in her/him. According to Wolsŏng sūnim, Iryŏp sūnim seemed to have felt that way. After turning sixty, she concentrated entirely on meditation, staying up in the sitting position even during the night.

### Kim Iryŏp as a Buddhist Writer

Yim Jungbin, a literary critic, said in "Kim Iryŏp non" (On Kim Iryŏp) that Iryŏp sūnim wanted to share her enlightenment and she put Buddhist homily into her writings wherever she could. Her urge to spread her newfound belief was so strong that she continued to write even after becoming a nun despite her pledge to her *ūnsa*, Man'gong sūnim, that she would not write.<sup>41</sup> This is where she differed from other Korean Buddhist clergy and where she exhibited her creativity. She wrote not only in *han'gŭl* (Korean alphabet) but also in various literary styles—poetry, essays, and autobiographical recollections.

As a *sōnsa*, Iryŏp sūnim wrote to popularize *Sŏn* Buddhist doctrine, but three particular themes stand out in her post-conversion writings: To end suffering, to search for self and for meaning of life, and to bring salvation to the suffering multitude—the very same three motivations that led her to Buddhism.<sup>42</sup>

In the early years of her religious life, she continued to write poetry, her favorite genre. Seventeen of twenty-three poems were written in 1932, four years after she entered the mountain. That was obviously the pivotal year. According to Buswell, it takes about three-and-a-half years before one can be ordained as a regular priest or nun—six months as *haengja* ("postulant") and three years as a novitiate. During this time, one could easily leave Buddhism, but thereafter it would become more difficult.<sup>43</sup>

Thus, in 1932, Iryŏp was in her mid-30s and was still struggling at the crossroads of life before she took the road not taken—and one of no return. These poems continue to have romantic themes but with Buddhist messages. Novelist Pak Chong Hwa wrote on the occasion of Iryŏp sūnim's posthumous publication of *Mirae* in 1974 that her postconversion poems had a similar flair to that seen in Han Yongun's poems.<sup>44</sup> Yearning for lost love was still there, but, unlike her earlier poems, there was a sense of peace for she had now (in 1932) acquired the Buddhist perspective of transcending narrow human love and boundaries, artificially created by human beings. A 1932 poem read:

Things cast shadows.

My approaching lover makes a rustle.

Peach blossoms smile silently

But in the winter mountain, plum blossoms bloom,

Who could deny that spring and winter are one?

Another poem of that year, "Nim ege" ("To My Lover"), clearly exhibited the signs of Buddhist thinking.

Trusting your words.

My young soul struggles to trek on the road you showed me.

But it's hard to tell when I'll reach where you are

For I do not even know the way.

Was it 1,000 years or 10,000 years ago that you called me?

When I hear your voice inside me,

I feel as though I'm going to see you right here,

And I get lost in (religious) ecstasy,

But when I return to reality, I am still where I was.<sup>45</sup>

The lover of whom this poem sings is no longer the secular lover but is now the Buddha of eons ago, who called her during one of Iryŏp's former lives. He seemed so close and yet was so far away. She might have been thinking of her lost love, who now appeared as the Buddha.

If the above two poems betrayed vacillation and confusion between Iryŏp sūnim's worldly lover and religious deity, the next poem demonstrates her complete abandonment to and reliance on the religion. In "Kwi tti" (Conversion; lit. "return to reliance"), she confessed:

This confused and bewildered body  
Has converted to Buddhist teaching.  
I can't be happier, for I now  
Study the sacred knowledge.  
But I do not have good ears, and  
Must rely completely on thee.<sup>46</sup>

After the bumper crop year of poems in 1932, Iryöp sūnim seldom wrote poetry again and concentrated on short, reflective pieces, many of which were autobiographical. When one looks at *Na ūi hoesang rok* (My Recollections), it becomes clear that she was keenly interested in discovering herself and explaining her motivations for becoming a nun. The main title of *My Recollections* is "Chilli rül morūmnida" (I Do Not Know the Truth [Ultimate Truth]) and is divided into forty-nine headings, which occupy more than 100 pages of the first volume of *Miraese*. The subjects range from her personal accounts, her Christian family background, her parents' life stories, close friends' anecdotes, childhood memories, her native village, and her love affairs, to such more public-oriented topics as her controversial views on chastity, religion, and even the difficulties of reaching Buddhahood.

Then, there are the many and more serious essays, written for the direct purpose of spreading *Sōn* Buddhism. Many of these were discovered after her death and edited in the second volume of *Miraese* under the heading of *Pop'o rok* (The Records of Words of Buddhism), which has a main subtitle of "Ilch'ehwa ūi kil" (The Way Toward Unity). *Pop'o rok* occupies the first 150 pages of the second volume. A sampling of titles of parts would reveal the issues with which Iryöp sūnim was preoccupied: "Life," "Reality and Human Beings," "Thought, Dream, and Reality," "Toward Rebuilding Buddhist Organizations," "Mind," "Return to Void," "Prayer," "Meditation and Enlightenment," "Self-Discovery," "The Way to Eternal Life," "Unifying Soul," and "Life Without Suffering."<sup>47</sup> In many of these, she emphasized the need to become one with the universe, or *Ilch'ehwa*, and to become like Buddha—the one who was able to part with human anguish and to achieve peace of mind. "All solutions existed in the ability to become one."<sup>48</sup>

Both genres (poetry and prose) of her writings reveal her firm belief in the twin *Sōn* doctrines that enlightenment was innate in the minds of all sentient beings, and that mind initiated all action and was the master of

the body. Iryöp sūnim taught that, to attain the twin objectives, one needed to practice meditation in order to be able to sever ties with the world, to have no attachments, to empty one's mind, and to return to the void. These were the ways of liberation—from the pain of life and death.<sup>49</sup> Then, one's mind would be able to control the body; it could also subsume all things in existence, from one's own body, to the earth, humankind, and all the animals. Thus, the entire universe was but a reflection of one's own mind. These messages were so precious and she was so convinced of their correctness in solving human problems that she felt great urgency in sharing them with others. In other words, she had to sing her "song" for eternity.<sup>50</sup> Her song, of course, was her writing and she was driven to write.

According to Wōlsōng, Iryöp sūnim found it extremely difficult to cease writing suddenly, for, by the time she came to the temple, writing had become so much a part of her life that she wrote secretly and without light, deep into the night—only by moonlight in the summer and by the reflection of snow in the winter—or she then simply scribbled in complete darkness. After she passed away, Wōlsōng found many hidden manuscripts, which were hard to decipher because they had been written in the dark.<sup>51</sup>

At the end of her life, Iryöp sūnim pointed out the difficulties of attaining what she had been preaching and emphasized the need for incessant effort. She confessed: "Buddhist teaching saved me from my crises, but I have not yet reached the stage of great courage due to innumerable past residues, which, even at age seventy, could not completely be removed. I have not thoroughly emptied myself to recover my real self (*pona*)."<sup>52</sup> Fearing, however, that people, preoccupied with gaining salvation, might neglect life, she urged people to lead a meaningful life for it will not return as it is. "One could not end life," she commented. "Life is like a drama with one act ending and another one beginning."<sup>53</sup>

So how did Iryöp sūnim try to reclaim what existed innately inside her, the source of holiness, the enlightenment, or the Buddha-nature or Buddha-mind? She did so through *Sōn* practices, which she taught and practiced with all her mind, soul, and body. She was so totally committed to meditation and so intent on succeeding to regain the Buddha-nature that existed in her that she remained in meditative posture continuously for nearly ten years toward the end of her life. About three years before her death, the lower half of her body became so atrophied for lack of use and movement that she could not walk, and they had to help her to get up with support at her sides.

## Conclusion

At first glance, Kim Iryöp's life seems full of contradictions. She was born into a Christian family but converted to Buddhism. She yearned for a happy family life but abandoned her two marriages within only a few years. She was bereft of her entire immediate family when she was only twenty; she was desperate for companionship but departed the secular world for that of a solitary meditative nun. She sought to be recognized by her literary peers for her writing, but she was a permanent outsider. Her professional life before and after she became a nun seems especially contradictory, but her earlier life constituted a foundation on which she built the later phase.

Yim Jungbin compares Iryöp sūnim's life with a lotus blossom, a flower which grows and blooms in the mud. Iryöp sūnim arose like a white lotus blossom from the mud, which can be compared with the youthful period of her life and which was necessary for the later stage. Because of her troubled past, she was able to abandon the "lesser self" of her youth and find enlightenment in the state of *Sōn*.<sup>54</sup> Soong chongjung (head of Chogyejong) remarked in the introduction to *Mirae*:

There is no saint who is a saint from the beginning. Everyone has human frailties. One who overcomes that becomes a saint. The issue is how to win over past mistakes. If a person wants to become truly great, one must experience difficulties and pass through the process of trial and ordeal and roam and pass the passages of obstacles. With that in mind, Iryöp sūnim's accomplishments are truly great. The first part of her life was indeed full of difficulties, but she made that as the basis for attaining Buddhahood and perfecting virtue. She was thus able to spend the rest of her life in pursuit of truth [as a religious ascetic].<sup>55</sup>

A comment like that reminds one of St. Augustine, one of the greatest saints of Catholicism, whose *Confessions* were the unsparing and humble revelations of Augustine's past sins and his search for redemption. Such baring of souls by the religious is very much in the tradition of mysticism<sup>56</sup> of world religions such as Christianity and Buddhism. Iryöp sūnim is almost repetitious in recalling her past (sins) in her writings as if she were in a confessional with the earnest hope that they be properly forgiven so that she could be certain of the love Buddha (God) has for her.<sup>57</sup>

The Buddhist phase of her life was a journey during which the former Iryöp died and a new, hopeful Iryöp was born to embark on the road to discover the "greater self." By discarding the love of the secular world, her world was opened up to that of "greater love." That does not mean that she forgot her entire past. Her past was recast in wider and deeper context, giving different perspectives. Iryöp sūnim's writings recollecting the later stages of her life are teachings of Buddhism and have a characteristic of Buddhist missionary literature.<sup>58</sup>

In poems of part-romantic, part-Buddhist themes, some literary critics consider Kim Iryöp to have succeeded in the tradition established by Han Yongun,<sup>59</sup> also a literary Buddhist monk, who, by writing in *han'gul*, brought Korea's Buddhist literature into modern times.<sup>60</sup> This is quite a compliment, albeit a posthumous one, from mainline literary figures. The literary acclaim she pursued in her youth came late—decades after she became a nun. When her *Ch'ōng ch'un ŭl pulsarūgo*<sup>61</sup> was published in 1960 and 1962, it was a huge success. But, by that time, the kind of critique her writing received mattered little to her, for she had entered a stage where she could not be destroyed by slanderous criticism.<sup>62</sup> Han, like Kim Iryöp, explored the mystery of love persistently and completely as no other modern Korean writer had. That is what made Han a poet and a novelist of love, a rarity in his generation and in the whole range of modern Korean literature.<sup>63</sup> But Kim Iryöp went further—she unabashedly brought her own life into her writing and used herself as a source for examples to make her point. For instance, by recasting her pre-Buddhist life in inspirational writings, she taught the importance of self-worth, self-confidence, self-awareness, self-awakening, and self-realization—the messages she specifically aimed at women. Rather than distancing herself on the mountain as a nun, Iryöp sūnim reached out, through her writing, and identified herself with other women (and men) of all walks of life, uniting herself with ordinary people, which was consistent with her belief of *Ilch'e hwa*, or becoming one—with people and the universe.

Iryöp sūnim's prose serves as inspirational literature from which one can derive refinement, faith, and enlightenment. It is also a road map to attain greater love. In this genre, she used metaphors by creatively and selectively drawing on Korean myths, fables, and historical legends, which is very much in the tradition of the world's religious writing.

Asked what the greatest legacy of Iryöp sūnim was, Wōlsōng pointed out three particular points: First, she popularized Buddhist teaching by writing in plain language and *han'gul*. Second, she brought respect to

Buddhism. And, most important, she enhanced the position of Buddhist nuns to an immeasurable degree. That she was an educated feminist reformer before becoming a nun is in itself a phenomenon that people recognized. But she went further; she emphasized nuns' education, raised funds for the purpose by writing the script for, and even producing, a Buddhist play, *Yi Ch'a Don ū chugūm* (The Death of Yi Ch'a Don), and succeeded in erecting a modern building for the nuns' sole use. By becoming a Buddhist nun, she undoubtedly abandoned all her worldly aspirations, but, in the end, she succeeded in fulfilling her secular, feminist goal of lifting up women not only to the level of men but even beyond. She showed people in general how to recover their inner perfect self, their Buddhahood, and attain enlightenment, which is the end of suffering and source of happiness and life until *miraese ka tahatorok*, the end of the world to come, and beyond.

On her last birthday, she reportedly said, "having learned from life's experiences, having forgotten all past anguish, having surrendered completely to Buddha, I am living peacefully and happily, without pain."<sup>64</sup> Indeed, the joy and peace she attained are forever commemorated in Hwanhidae (Hall of Exultation), a nuns' hermitage at Sudōksa. Iryōp sūnim's smiling life-sized portrait is hung on the wall of the large main room, used as a reception area, and in the courtyard stands a five-story stone pagoda erected two years after her death. Looking at her face with its faint smile and at the stone tower and thinking about passages from her poems and prose, I felt touched by her spirit and holiness. As Master Unho remarked in the congratulatory remark in *Miraese*, reading Iryōp sūnim's life stories can become an occasion for drawing near to Buddhist philosophy.<sup>65</sup>

Kim Iryōp's conflicting worlds have become one, *ilch'ehwa*, reconciled in every aspect. In the process, she created a whole body of popular Buddhist literature, easily accessible to ordinary people. Whether it is pure literature or not, creating a body of religious literature easily understandable to ordinary people is in itself creative. In her writings, we experience Iryōp sūnim's flashes of holiness as well as sparks of creativity.

## Notes

1. I use the term *sūnim* to refer to Kim Iryōp after she became a nun and to other nuns and monks. Koreans refer to all Buddhist monks and nuns as *sūnim*, a term of

respect that is a contraction of *song*, the Sino-Korean transliteration of *sangha* (congregation of monks), combined with the honorific Korean suffix *-nim*. Korean monks use the term *chung* when referring to themselves; this is a Korean word that derives from a Sino-Korean term meaning "congregation," or by synecdoche just "monk." Buswell, *Zen*, 69.

2. Interview 23 June 1998 at Tōksan Hotel, Tōksan Ch'ungch'ōng Namdo, near Sudōksa. According to temple records, Sudōksa was founded in the A.D. 590s, the late Paekche period. It is one of the five main temples of Korea, where there is a comprehensive training center comprising a meditation hall, a monks' college and a center for studying monastic rules. The main hall was built in 1308, one of only a few to survive through successive invasions Korea endured. *Exploring Korean Buddhist Temples* (Seoul: Korean National Tourism Organization, n.d.).

3. Kim Iryōp, *Miraese*.

4. The monk Ildang at Chikjisa, Kimch'ŏn—Kyōngsang Pukdo—is reportedly Iryōp sūnim's son, born of a union with a Japanese man in 1922 during Iryōp's stay in Japan. Ildang sūnin authored a two-volume autobiographical work about his relationship with Kim Iryōp. Kim T'aeshin, *Rahula ū samogok*. He also has a book that combines his "mother's" poems with his paintings, *Tugogan jōng* (Leaving Love Behind).

5. The two nuns told me that, during Iryōp sūnim's lifetime, there was absolutely no mention of her son despite the late nun's considerable candor about her former secular life and that there was no extant proof that Monk Ildang is her son. But they have come to terms with him and have given him the benefit of the doubt. I will not deal with the question of Iryōp's son in this paper.

6. Sōng, *Asea yōsōng*, 307–26.

7. *Ibid.*, 307.

8. *Ibid.*, 54–5.

9. Sōng, *Asea yōsōng*, 307–8.

10. *Ipsan* refers to becoming a Buddhist cleric. The expression probably comes from the fact that most Buddhist temples and monasteries have been located deep in the mountains due to the Yi policy of suppressing and driving Buddhism out of cities.

11. Yu, *Han Yongun*, 11.

12. Oh, "Kim Iryōp: Pioneer Writer/Reformer," 9–30.

13. A nun or monk, inspired by his/her contemplation, who would continue on for the rest of her/his career as a meditation monk and achieves a measure of recognition for the quality of her/his practice, eventually becomes a *Sōn* master (*Sōnsa*) at a major training monastery. Buswell, *Zen*, 70.

14. Kim, *Miraese*, 1:32.

15. A colloquial Korean expression.

16. Kim, *Miraese*, 1:472–74.

17. The work of the Koryō period, consisting of 83,000 wood carvings of Buddhist canons, currently enshrined in Haeinsa, Kyōngsang Pukdo, northeast of Taegu.

18. Kim, *Miraese*, 1:472.

19. Kim, "Pulmun t'ujok yi junyōn e" (1930) in *Sudōksa ūi noŭl*, 1976.

20. Kim, *Sudōksa ūi noŭl*, 44–45.

21. This Mr. B., according to Wōlsōng sūnim and as I suspected, is Hon. Paek Sōng-uk, a prominent educator who served as the president of the Tong'guk University in Seoul, Korea and as a government minister.

22. Kim, *Sudōksa ūi noŭl*, p. 46.

23. Kim, *Miraese*, 1:321–22.
24. Buswell, *Zen*, 149.
25. Buswell, *Tracing Back the Radiance*.
26. Buswell, *Zen*, 149.
27. Yi, "Wŏrha chungjong ūi," 283–95.
28. Buswell, *Zen*, 22.
29. De Bary, Chan, and Watson, *Chinese Tradition*, 346–47.
30. Kim, *Miraese*, 2:51, 74.
31. De Bary, *Chinese Tradition*.
32. *Ibid.*, 347.
33. Batchelor, *Lotus Flowers*, 109.
34. Kim, *Miraese*, 2:51.
35. A temple in Chŏlla Namdo, a short distance southeast of the city of Kwangju, site of the only Buddhist training center for foreigners.
36. Kim, *Miraese*, 1:465.
37. Buswell, *Zen*, 154.
38. *Ibid.*
39. *Ibid.*, 25, 152.
40. Batchelor, *Lotus Flowers*, 109.
41. Because obeying one's master was supposed to be absolute in Korean Buddhist tradition, one could only imagine Iryŏp sŭnim's inner conflict between her desire to write and her obligation to obey her master.
42. See above, 7.
43. Buswell, *Zen*, 76–86.
44. Kim, *Miraese*, 1:22.
45. *Ibid.*, 1:54–55.
46. *Ibid.*, 1: 62.
47. *Ibid.*, 2:31–153.
48. *Ibid.*, 2:126.
49. *Ibid.*, 1:325.
50. *Ibid.*, 1:329.
51. Interview with Wŏlsong, Tŏksan Hotel, 23 June 1998.
52. Kim, *Miraese*, 2:153.
53. *Ibid.*, 1:332, 351; 2:153.
54. Kim, *Sudŏksa ūi noil*, 11–12.
55. Soong Chongjong, "Kanhaeng sa," in Kim, *Miraese*, 1:20.
56. Gardiner, "Introduction," *Confessions*, xii.
57. *Ibid.*
58. Yim, *Noil*, 14–15.
59. Pak Chang hwa, in Kim, *Miraese*, 1:22.
60. Yi, "I chaeŭ naemyŏ," 5.
61. This is the later title of the same earlier publication, *Ōnu sudoin ūi hoasang* (Recollections of a Certain Nun) (1960), *Ch'ŏngch'un ul pulsariŭgo* (After Torching the Youth), Seoul: Munsŏn'gak, 1962. The edition with the second title was an immediate success, going through many editions. Money from the sale of the book enabled Sudŏksa to purchase land, which considerably eased the poverty of the monastery.
62. Yi, "I chaeŭ naemyŏ," 9.

63. Yu, *Han Yong-un*, 17, 83.

64. Interview with Wŏlsong sŭnim, 23 June 1998.

65. Unho, "Ha sa" (Congratulatory Note), in Kim, *Miraese*, 1:18.

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