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Anna DINIEJKO-WĄS
University of Warsaw
ae.diniejko2@uw.edu.pl

FROM A RADICAL NEW WOMAN TO A DEVOUT ZEN BUDDHIST NUN[1]

THE EVOLUTION OF KIM WŎNJU'S WORLDVIEW

ABSTRACT Kim Wŏnju (also known as Kim Iryŏp, (1896–1971) went down in modern Korean history as one of the main representatives of the 'New Women' in the 1920s and remains an icon for contemporary feminists, even though later in her life she underwent a radical spiritual and ideological transformation. As a feminist intellectual, she devoted herself to gender issues and the fight to change the position of women in Korean society. As an influential Buddhist nun, she studied religious teachings and sought to interpret the existence of modern man and woman through a religious worldview. The article is devoted to two seemingly completely different phases of the life of Kim Wŏnju – a radical feminist writer and a pious Buddhist nun, searching for self-awakening and authentic personal freedom.

Keywords: New Woman, Buddhist Nun, feminist writer, Japanese colonization, self-awakening, religious worldview

[1] The transliteration in this text follows the McCune–Reischauer (MR) system. Korean names appear in their traditional order, with the family name preceding the given name.

Ill. 1. Kim Wŏnju,
source: https://kibaek.tistory.com/693

1. A RADICAL NEW WOMAN

Kim Wŏnju (1896-1971), a prominent Korean writer, journalist and feminist, underwent a profound evolution in her worldview throughout her life. Born in 1896, she lived during a tumultuous period in Korean history marked by Japanese colonization and socio-cultural transformations. From her early years as a radical *Sinyŏsŏng* (New Woman)[2] challenging societal norms to her later life as a devout Zen Buddhist nun, her journey reflects not only personal growth but also the complex intersections of feminism, spirituality, and cultural identity in early 20th century Korea.

As the daughter of the Methodist pastor and enlightened housewife her upbringing was characterized by an environment that challenged traditional gender roles and prioritized the pursuit of knowledge over societal expectations. Her parents were fervently involved in the reform movement, advocating for social change and women's education. Their commitment to progressive ideals laid the foundation for Kim Wŏnju's unconventional upbringing. The household was not governed by the traditional roles assigned to women, and this divergence from societal norms became a catalyst for her intellectual and personal development.

[2] *Sinyŏsŏng* (New Woman) is a sociocultural phenomenon from the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, which emerged as a result of social and cultural transformations. The term "New Women" first appeared in Western women's literature and the press in the 1890s and in Korea during the first two decades of the 20th century. It was introduced by an English writer and social activist Sarah Grand (real name Frances Elizabeth McFall, 1854-1943) in the *North American Review* in 1894. It referred to young, educated English and American women who fought against the limitations imposed on women in the public sphere and sought alternative models of life. In this sense, the "New Women" quickly became a symbol of modernity and changes in gender relations in Europe, America, and Asia. In English, there is a rich literature on the Victorian "New Woman". See, for example, A. Richardson, C. Willis (eds), *The New Woman in Fiction and in Fact: Fin-de-Siècle Feminisms*, London 2001; S. Ledger, *The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism at the Fin de Siècle*, Manchester 1997; P. Murphy, *Time is of the Essence: Temporality, Gender, and the New Woman*, Albany 2001.

Her mother played a pivotal role in shaping her daughter's worldview. Rejecting the notion of confining women to traditional roles like cooking and sewing, she believed that such practices perpetuated the backwardness of women and reinforced a patriarchal social order. Undeterred by societal criticism, she encouraged her eldest daughter to study, emphasizing the importance of a modern education that transcended gender-based limitations.

[My mother] said that she would raise me, her daughter, to be as good as ten other people's sons. My mother, who had enlightened herself early thanks to attending the Jesus Church, enrolled me in school at a time when women did not even know that they could go to school and made me a 'girl student, female student' and allowed me to be proud of it. However, my mother, who said she would even sell her house and land to help me pay for my education, passed away the year I graduated from elementary school, and my father passed away when I graduated from middle school.[3]

Kim Wŏnju's profound connection with Christianity can be attributed to her father, whose influence played a pivotal role in shaping his daughter's intellectual growth. During her formative years as a schoolgirl and later as a student, she discovered altruism, public service and helping others in Christianity. Guided by her father, she learned the importance of self-sacrifice and the virtue of serving others. As a caring parent and devout Christian, her father practiced in his private life what he preached publicly to the members of his church. Kim Wŏnju was not only taught Christian ideals but witnessed them manifest in her father's daily life, leaving an indelible impression that would shape her own values and beliefs.

My father was born in Yonggang, Pyŏngannam-do and was a devout pastor of the Jesus Church. He was a person who put into practice the words of Jesus, 'Love others as yourself', and throughout his life his mind was filled with gratitude to God and he ended his life with a sense of fulfillment.[4]

At the same time, her father imbued in her the conviction that only Christians would ascend to heaven, relegating non-Christians to an inevitable destiny of hell. Growing up within the Christian faith, she developed a steadfast conviction in the concepts of good and evil, as well as the existence of heaven and hell in the afterlife. Under the influence of her father's teachings, she envisioned herself, even in her childhood, as a future missionary dedicated to spreading the Christian faith among non-believers and shielding them from the threat of hellfire. Protestantism held a magnetic allure for her, characterized by its distinctive features: the simplicity of faith expressed through authentic piety, a focus on personal salvation, the forgiveness of sins, an aspiration for heaven and eternal life, the benevolence of God, and an ardent zeal for evangelizing others – all accompanied by the inner serenity that follows a conversion experience. However, as she embraced the belief that repentance for sins led to personal

[3] The quote comes from a story by Kim Wŏnju titled *Ch'ŏngch'un-ŭl pulsarŭgo* (I Buried My Youth) included in Kim U-yŏng (ed.), *Kim Iryŏp Sŏnjip* (A Selection of Works by Kim Iryŏp), Seoul 2012, pp. 398-399.

[4] Ibid., p. 398.

salvation and peace of mind, doubts about the faith taught in this manner began to manifest later on.

Raised in the spirit of Christian ideas, equal rights and social justice, Kim Wŏnju received a fairly thorough modern education. At the tender age of eight, she began studying at the Kuse Sohakkyo, Protestant Elementary Missionary School in her native village. After a span of two years, she enrolled in the Samsung Pot'ong Yŏhakkyo, girls' primary school located in the port city of Chinnamp'o, completing her studies and graduating in 1912. During her time there, she received a formal Christian education, delving into subjects such as the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. At the same time, her father attained ordination as a Methodist minister.

However, at the age of 11, Kim Wŏnju experienced a profound loss when her younger sister passed away, causing deep sorrow within the family. This poignant event served as inspiration for her inaugural literary creation in 1907 – a brief poem titled *Tongsaeng-ŭi chugŭm* (The Death of a Younger Sister) which in fact was composed one year earlier than famous Ch'oe Namsŏn's (1890-1957), poem *Hae-egesŏ sonyŏn-ege* (From the Ocean to the Youth, 1908). Had it not been for the young age of the author the poem might have marked the beginning of a new era of Korean poetry.[5] After the death of her mother in 1909 and her father around 1912, she and her sisters found themselves under the care of their grandmother. Tragically, not long after, three younger sisters also passed away. By the age of 23, Kim Wŏnju had faced the loss of her entire family. Undoubtedly, the overwhelming feelings of grief and solitude, coupled with a heightened awareness of human mortality and life's uncertainties, left an indelible mark on her worldview. These experiences played a significant role in her transformation, leading her first to atheism and later to embracing a Buddhist path as a nun. Some scholars posit that the series of familial deaths shook her Christian faith, fostering doubts about the nature of God.

Adhering to her both parents' emphasis on education, Kim Wŏnju completed her studies at Ehwa Haktang in 1913. Seeking the highest level of education available to women in Korea, around 1915 she enrolled at the Ehwa Haktang College, the pioneering institution for women's higher education and the precursor to Ehwa Woman's University. Yet as a student of Ehwa Haktang she joined the Imunhoe students' literary club where she began to showcase her literary prowess, although no works from this period are currently known. Functioning as a meeting ground for female Christian students, the Imunhoe Literary Club created a platform for refining public speaking and debating skills within a nurturing educational setting. After graduating the college, she also completed nursing training at the Tongdaemun Puin Pyŏngwŏn (Tongdaemun Women's Hospital).

It was during this period that Kim Wŏnju developed a friendship with Kim Hwallan (1899–1970)[6], also known as Kim Helen, who would later establish herself as

[5] Noh Milim, "Kim Iryŏp-ŭi yŏsŏngsŏng koch'al" (Study on Kim Iryŏp's Femininity), *Yŏsŏng yŏn'gu* (The Women's Studies), vol. 67 (2004), p. 292.

[6] Kim Hwallan was an outstanding educator, feminist, social activist and politician known under the pseudonym Uwŏl. She founded the World Federation of Methodist), Uniting Church Women and *The Korea Times*. She received her PhD in education from Columbia University in 1931, and then

the author of numerous articles for the inaugural feminist magazine *Shinyŏja* (New Woman)[7].

During her student years in 1918, Kim Wŏnju, who had experienced a broken engagement before, accepted a marriage proposal, partly out of curiosity and partly in the hope that she might be able to escape from economic poverty. She entered into matrimony with an elderly professor of chemistry, Yi Noik, at the Chŏndong Protestant Church in *Kyŏngsŏng*, today's Seoul.[8] A substantial age gap existed between them as he was two decades older than her, and he grappled with a profound disability – a missing leg. It is likely that Kim Wŏnju became aware of this disability only around the wedding, when she discovered he used a prosthesis. The combination of the significant age difference, the disability, and a lack of mutual understanding may have contributed to the quick breakdown of the marriage.

Kim Wŏnju and many other students actively participated in patriotic activities. When the peaceful protests of the March 1st Movement began in 1919, she secretly printed anti-Japanese leaflets, which were then distributed on the streets. She managed to avoid arrest, and when the independence movement began to fade after a few months, thanks to her husband who was relatively well off, she left for Tokyo, escaping not only possible repression, but also from her failed marriage. She briefly studied English at the Tōyō Eiwa Jogakuin girls' school, founded by the Canadian Methodist Church, and probably returned to Korea later that year or early the following year. At that time, the writer and poet Yi Kwangsu (1892–1950)[9] gave her the pen name Iryŏp (One Leaf), which she used throughout her later life. The literary pseudonym, referenced the Japanese writer Higuchi Ichiyō (1872–1896), who died in the year of her birth, and the pronunciation 'Iryŏp' corresponds to the Japanese pronunciation of 'Ichiyō'.[10] Undoubtedly, Yi Kwangsu recognized the young student's literary talent and sought to inspire her to delve further into the realm of literature, in the hope that she would become a unique figure in the circle of Korean literature. Kim Iryŏp, as she then wanted to be called, strongly identified with her pen name. She expressed in one of her poems, titled *Han ip* (One Leaf), that she was a lonely leaf floating in a stream

became the dean of Ewha College, a women's college. By the time of her death, Ewha College had grown to become one of the largest women's university in the world.

7 The magazine *Shinyŏja*, created in 1920, served as a platform for progressive Korean women, providing educational and nationalistic content to women, which was of great significance given the country's situation under Japanese occupation (1910-1945). The term *sinyŏsŏng* referred to both the editors and the readers of the new publication. According to the founders' intentions, the magazine was aimed at young Korean women who had received an education based on Western standards and had adopted a Western lifestyle. They were advocates of gender equality, egalitarian relationships in marriage, and women's economic independence.

8 Noh Milim, „Kim...," p. 301.

9 Yi Kwangsu was a writer and national liberation activist and intellectual during the early 20th century. He played a significant role in the cultural and literary movements of Korea during the Japanese occupation (1910-1945), and is often considered one of the pioneers of modern Korean literature, best known for his novel *Mujŏng* (The Heartless, 1917).

10 Noh Milim, „Kim...," p. 300.

of water towards the sea. The leaf, though torn to shreds by the storms, finally slowly reaches the ocean.

One solitary leaf
On a waterfall fallen
To pieces torn.
Its spirit will reach
The vast sea.[11]

During this time, she also met Na Hyesŏk (1896–1948)[12], a New Woman who had come to Japan to study and had become famous for her article *Isangjŏk puin* (The Ideal Woman) published in the students' magazine called *Hakjigwang* in 1914.

Kim Iryŏp's sojourn in Japan broadened her worldview in profound ways. The Seitō movement (Blue Stockings) led by the pioneering figure Hiratsuka Raichō (1886–1971)[13], and the ideas of the Swedish thinker Ellen Key (1849–1926)[14] had a profound impact on her perspectives.

Upon returning to Korea, she actively engaged in feminist activities, expressing her convictions and striving to promote gender equality and women's emancipation. In the early 1920s, inspired by *Seitō* magazine, together with Na Hyesŏk and Kim Hwallan, she began editing the feminist magazine *Shinyŏja*, receiving financial support from the Ehwa School and her husband. Created and edited by a woman, the magazine provided a platform for public appearances by other New Women, who advocated feminist ideas and criticized traditional social relations based on male domination. Its main goals were to promote gender equality, liberate women from the oppressive institution of patriarchal marriage, sponsor social and professional activation of women, as well as their self-fulfillment through education. The magazine also tackled the issue of national liberation in a slightly veiled way.

Kim Iryŏp soon became one of the most vocal members of this small but famous group of women writers in the editorial board. *Shinyŏja* was one of the few first Korean magazines allowed to be published by the Japanese colonial authorities after the 1st March movement's demonstrations as part of the new *munhwa chŏngch'i* ('cultural

[11] Ibid., p. 300.

[12] Na Hyesŏk was a Korean feminist, painter, writer, poet and independent activist. She is recognized as a pioneering figure in Korean art, particularly for her contributions to modern Western-style painting.

[13] Hiratsuka Raichō was a Japanese writer, feminist, and social activist. She was a key figure in the women's movement in Japan during the Meiji (1868-1912), Taishō (1912-1926) and Shōwa eras (1926-1989), and is particularly known as the founder and chief editor of the literary magazine *Seitō* (Blue Stocking), which was published from 1911 to 1916. The magazine played a significant role in advocating for women's rights, sexual liberation, and gender equality in Japanese society. Hiratsuka Raichō was also involved in the suffrage movement and supported the ideas of modern, independent "new women". Her activities influenced the development of feminist attitudes in Japan during that period.

[14] Ellen Key was a Swedish writer, educator, and teacher associated with the women's movement. She was a pioneer in pedagogical reform, advocating for an individualistic approach to child-upbringing that emphasized a child's right to free development. Key authored books such as *Love and Marriage* (1912) and *The Century of the Child* (1909), which became symbols of the ideas of the "new family" and "new education".

policy'). Articles were most often written in a mixed Sino-Korean script (*kuk'an munhon yongch'e*), understandable to educated New Women.[15]

Kim Iryŏp published polemical articles and short stories criticizing social discrimination against women. She advocated for their emancipation, access to education and equality before the law. However, the dominant theme of her early work was the promotion of women's right to express their own feelings and freely choose a partner, which in the first decades of the 20th century was described in press publications with the enigmatic concept of *chayu yŏnae* ('free love'). On this issue, Kim Wŏnju revealed a more decisive radicalism than most of the Korean New Women who understood *chayu yŏnae* as the right to only freely choose one's own husband. Meanwhile, her views were much closer to the idea of the permissive moral revolution of the 1960s. Her sense of morality dramatically departed from Christian morality and turned towards a radical idea, which she called *Shinjŏngjoron* (The New Theory of Purity). Her views on female chastity diverged from the Christian moral code she once believed in and from traditional Confucian norms, and she argued for a reevaluation of the moral standards imposed on women. She questioned why women were held to more rigid moral standards than men and challenged the unfair judgments and restrictions placed on women's actions and choices. According to her, through falling in love and romance a woman could manifest her own freedom, modernity and individuality. She did not view purity as a moral judgment of the body. Her concept of purity went beyond a narrow focus on physical chastity and challenged the societal expectations and moral standards imposed on women.

At a certain point in her life, Kim Wŏnju's understanding of Christian religion proved to be quite unique. She began to associate Christianity primarily with progress, affirmation of human individuality, self-realization, social engagement of women, rather than with a sense of guilt and repentance for sins. Her search for independent identity and freedom had a significant impact on her attitude towards morality. Promoting unconventional femininity and liberal love were seen as reflective of the spirit of the times. In the intellectual society of Chosŏn during that time, which aimed to break free from the constraints of old customs and embrace new values, concepts like free love for many young individuals was an unfamiliar and, simultaneously, captivating modern idea that supplanted the traditional one.

However, her progressive ideas, which faced strong opposition from conservative circles, created a notable contrast with societal norms. Korean male intellectuals harshly criticized Kim Iryŏp's depiction of romantic relationships, viewing it as a manifestation of 'deviant morality' that posed a threat to the nation-building process.[16] Among the critics of *shinyŏja* was the writer Kim Tongin (1900-1951)[17], whereas Yi Kwangsu

[15] After Korea lost its sovereignty, the Japanese authorities put an end to the development of Korean writing, allowing Koreans only to use a mixed *han'gŭl* script with Chinese characters, which was an imitation of the Japanese writing style.

[16] J. Rhee, "'No Country for the New Woman': Rethinking Gender and Cultural Nationalism in Colonial Korea Through Kim Myŏngsun," *Acta Koreana*, vol. 17, no. 1 (2017), p. 407.

[17] Kim Tongin was a writer, poet, and literary scholar, born in P'yŏngyang into an affluent landowning family that adhered to the Protestant faith, and is regarded as a pioneer of realism and naturalism in

was an advocate for free love and a supporter of the New Women movement. In contrast, Kim Tongin took a critical stance towards the actions of them, perceiving them as a threat to the moral values of Korean women. The writer directed his criticism specifically at the New Women, initiating a series of tendentious attacks against them. This notable writer's perspectives sparked a cascade of similar critiques from other writers in the colonial press, creating a discourse that reflected the differing views within Korean society during that period. Yi Kwangsu astutely observed the dramatic situation of Korean women, recognizing it as a significant socio-cultural issue. He denounced the adverse impacts of early marriages and gender inequality. He advocated for progressive ideas on marriage, emphasizing the importance of conscious romantic relationships as the foundation for matrimony. However, he was ready to downplay emancipation issues, convinced that more pressing challenges confronted Korea. He argued that, in the early 20th century, the paramount concern for Korean society was not the liberation of women but rather the liberation of the nation.[18] In the 1920s, male intellectuals aimed to redirect the focus of the women's liberation and equal rights to emphasizing motherhood within a national context.[19]

Shinyŏja became a forum for reconsidering the status and role of Korean women doubly enslaved by Confucian patriarchal restrictions and colonialism. The magazine stimulated debate among intellectuals on pressing social issues, including Korea's future.[20] Above all, *Shinyŏja* initiated feminist activism in Korea and popularized the use of the term New Woman. The inaugural issue of the magazine published an appeal to women and housewives who suffered violence and were treated inhumanely, locked in hidden parts of their homes. All of them should be liberated through *kaksŏng* (awakening), the editorial insisted:

It goes without saying that as the world becomes smaller day by day and the scope for people to interact with each other becomes greater and greater, today's busy men especially demand that Korean women wake up and began to act actively on their own.[21]

The editors argued that the existence of patriarchal relations at all levels of social life led to extreme and oppressive domination of men over women. Women must therefore be liberated from these patriarchal bonds.

After the first issue was published, the magazine immediately attracted the attention of the daily press. *Maeil Shinbo* and *Tonga Ilbo* mentioned its content and circulation. The *Tonga Ilbo* daily reported (May 4, 1920) that the first issue of *Shinyŏja* had sold two thousand copies. The relatively high circulation of the magazine suggests that

modern Korean literature. He is renowned for his mastery in crafting short stories that seamlessly blend exquisite aesthetic sensibilities with a succinct prose style rooted in an objective perspective.

18 H. Ogarek-Czoj, *Literatura koreańska XX wieku*, Warszawa 2016, p. 49.

19 J. Rhee, "No Country...," p. 411.

20 *Sinyŏja* had a short-lived existence, limited to the publication of only four issues. In June 1920, precisely in the year of its founding, it was banned by Japanese authorities. The official pretext for this prohibition was the alleged disturbance of social order.

21 Yoo Jin-wol (ed.), *Kim Iryŏp-ŭi <Shinyŏja> yŏn'gu* (Kim Iryŏp Study: In the Circle of Shinyŏja Magazine), Seoul 2006, p. 100.

it appealed to both educated women and men. With the publication of the first issue of *Shinyŏja*, the editors of the magazine gained popularity in other media. They were invited to the editorial offices of various newspapers for public debates on women's issues. Their opinions and published works were cited by newspapers and magazines. For example, the *Tonga Ilbo* published several articles, including some of Kim Iryŏp's. In addition, this newspaper reported a public lecture by Kim Iryŏp, sponsored by the editorial team of *Shinyŏja*, on the mission of the New Woman (May 9, 1920).

In an April article, titled *Uri shinyŏja-ŭi yogu-wa chujang* (New Women's Demands and Claims), Kim Iryŏp defined 'New Women' as those who *enjoy equal rights to freedom, responsibilities, work and pleasure* (*p'yŏngdŭng-ŭi chayu, p'yŏngdŭng-ŭi kwŏlli, p'yŏngdŭng-ŭi ŭimu, p'yŏngdŭng-ŭi nojak, p'yŏngdŭng-ŭi hyangnak*)... *constantly looking for ways to improve themselves (chagi paljŏn)*. This definition emphasizes the principles of equality in various aspects of life, including personal freedom, rights, responsibilities, work, and the pursuit of pleasure. Given the fact that *Shinyŏja* was a women's magazine, created by women and for women, the editors made it clear that writing was not exclusively the domain of men and called on women to write about and for women. And above all, let them talk about their own experiences.

Although the magazine did not contain any open criticism of Korea's political situation, the Japanese authorities banned its further publication in June 1920, after the fourth issue, on charges of 'disturbing social order and morality'. Despite its short period of existence, the magazine contributed to the popularization of feminist views and, above all, to the implementation of some of the emancipatory aspirations of women in Korea. With the liquidation of *Shinyŏja* each of the five founders, Kim Iryŏp, Pak Indŏk, Sin Chullya, Kim Hwallan and Na Hyesŏk, dispersed and never worked together again, although their fates and careers intersected in later years.

One of the most interesting examples of mixing literary fiction with journalism is a short story by Kim Iryŏp published in the second issue of *Shinyŏja*, entitled *K ŏnniege* (To the older sister K). The female narrator, using an epistolary convention, advises a woman not to fall into despair as a victim of a womanizing husband and to annul her marriage. She encourages her to take up a professional job and start her life anew.

If we women want to live in this world as respected persons, we must stop living in obedience and dependence on men. Let us stop being satisfied with our miserable lives. Thanks to our own abilities and strength, we can exist in society. Let our goal be to participate in noble and valuable social activities and work to become a role model for other new women.[22]

The author encourages Sister K to become a New Woman and take responsibility for her own fate, and convinces her that she will find true satisfaction by opposing gender discrimination and engaging in social life.

After the closure of *Shinyŏja*, Kim Iryŏp continued her campaign to improve women's living conditions and published articles in daily newspapers such as the *Tonga Ilbo* and the *Chosŏn Ilbo*, as well as in the literary magazines *Chosŏn Mundan* and *Kaebyŏk*. In the 1920s, the journalistic environment was dominated by men, so the opportunity

[22] Yoo Jin-wol, (ed.), *Kim Iryŏp Sŏnjip*..., p. 208.

for Kim Iryŏp to publish in the press can be considered a special distinction for this writer. From 1925 to 1928, she also worked as a literary reviewer for the *Tonga Ilbo*. The year 1926 turned out to be the peak of her literary career. She published three short stories: *Sunae-ŭi chugŭm* (*Death of Sunae*), *Sarang* (*Love*) and *Chagak* (*Awakening*). The dominant theme of her prose and journalism was the social and moral awakening of women who – thanks to modern education and emancipation – were to be free from traditional subordination to men, not only in the legal and economic sphere, but also the cultural one.

Most of Kim Iryŏp's articles written before 1927 concerned feminist and current social issues, as well as some lofty ideals, such as national and personal liberation. At the forefront of the feminist movement, Kim Iryŏp wrote almost obsessively about the awakening of a new femininity, the role of women in society, the importance of their education, as well as about love, marriage and family. She emphasized the need for comprehensive education for women and enabling them to obtain equal education with men. She called for a change in the traditional image of women, and encouraged them to shape their new, liberated identity. In an article published on January 8, 1927 in the *Chosŏn Ilbo* newspaper, titled "Na-ŭi chŏngjogwan" (My View of Virtue), the author criticized the centuries-old practice of moral double standards. She described the traditional obligation to maintain chastity as one of the most visible manifestations of gender discrimination in Korean society:

In the traditional concept, purity was materialized, so a woman with a past was treated as if she had become defiled and had lost her freshness. In other words, when sexual intercourse with a man occurred, the woman was treated as if her chastity had been lost. Purity in this case was perceived as the destruction of a container made of precious stones. However, chastity is not such a static object [...] Even if a woman has had several partners in the past, as long as she uses common sense, she will be able to completely erase from her memory what happened in the past and will be able to create a new life, fully devoting yourself to your new partner. Such a woman or man has purity that nothing can destroy.[23]

In her reflections, she came to the conclusion that true purity should concern only the sphere of the spirit, not the body. Therefore, in her opinion, premarital love relationships cannot influence a successful and happy married life.

Kim Iryŏp also called for a moral awakening among women, claiming that they, like men, should have the freedom to choose their life partner. She lamented that double standards still exist for both genders. She condemned traditional beliefs about 'women's chastity' as very harmful and even humiliating. In her opinion, purity is not an objective ethical and moral concept, but a manifestation of natural feeling – that is, pure love – resulting from the unrestrained desire of two people in love, a man and a woman.

In the magazine *Samch'ŏlli* she referred to the problem of divorce, which became the subject of public debate. In an article titled "Abolition of the concept of a virgin

[23] Kim Iryŏp, „Na-ŭi chŏngjogwan" (My View of Virtue), *Chosŏn Ilbo*, 8 January 1927, in: Kim U-yŏng, (ed.), *Kim Iryŏp Sŏnjip*..., p. 306.

and non-virgins" ("Chŏnyŏ pich'ŏnyŏ-ŭi kwannyŏm-ŭl yanggi hara"), she supported the possibility of widows and divorcees to remarry. She said with regret that many men and even some women with modern education consider the remarriage of women immoral. She did not support infidelity and advised women to wait at least three years before remarrying. However, she strongly supported women's equal right to remarry.

If a man is granted the right to remarry several times without any moral prejudice, shouldn't a woman be treated the same as he? [24]

The story *Kyeshi* (*Revelation*), published in March 1920 in the magazine *Shinyŏja*, is considered the most significant work on Christian themes in her work. The theme of *Kyeshi* is extremely religious both in terms of content and form, and the title itself says that God revealed himself to the heroine at the end of the story and introduces the Christian worldview to the readers through the voice of the main female character. The heroine of the story is a lonely widow, Mrs. Kim, who lives with her son Inwŏn – her greatest treasure and the only meaning of life. She devotes herself to him and worries constantly about his health and future. Her love for her child draws her to Christianity. She becomes a practicing Christian mainly to pray for his health and success. One day, Inwŏn falls ill, but to cure him, Mrs. Kim does not go to the shaman, as she would have done before adopting the new faith. Instead, he attends services even more intensely and offers fervent prayers to God. Despite this, her son's condition does not improve and he eventually dies, despite her loving care and prayers. At the time of her only child's death, Mrs. Kim experiences despair and intense sadness. Suddenly she falls into a deep sleep. She dreams that she is in church. There, she sees a new pastor dressed in white. He takes the form of a noble and majestic sage. Seeing the desperate woman, he advises her to renounce her earthly desires and trust in God's will.

It is easy to notice that the story *Revelation* contains, in addition to Christian elements, also Buddhist elements. In a sense, Buddhism, like Christianity, is a religion of salvation. A key issue in Buddhist soteriology is the possibility of achieving a state of 'perfect enlightenment'. This is not a state of Christian salvation, but liberation from ignorance. Mrs. Kim's 'enlightenment' comes down to the belief that the mortal world is a source of suffering. To free herself from it, she must free herself from the ties with the temporal world. Ten years after the publication of *Revelation*, Kim Iryŏp renounced the world in which she had previously lived and chose Buddhism to solve her life problems.

In her personal life, throughout almost the entire decade of the 1920s, Kim Iryŏp also remained faithful to her ideological declarations, although compared to the standards of the time, her private and intimate life seemed scandalous and immoral. Kim Iryŏp perceived falling in love as a modern phenomenon, synonymous with embracing the concept of women's freedom. In essence, 'New Women' viewed falling in love and engaging in romances as expressions of their freedom.

[24] Kim Iryŏp, *Chŏnyŏ pich'ŏnyŏ-ŭi kwannyŏm-ŭl yanggi hara* (Abolish the Concept of Virgin and Non-virgin), in: Kim U-yŏng, (ed.), *Kim Iryŏp Sŏnjip*..., pp. 338-339.

After the dissolution of her first marriage, she became involved with Im Nowŏl, better known as Imjanghwa, a writer who had a wife in Korea and was also once a partner of her friend, Kim Myŏngsun (1896-1951)[25].

In Japan, in 1921 she fell in love with a Japanese aristocrat and student of the Kyūshū Imperial University named Oda Seizo, from a wealthy and influential family whom she met on the train to Tokyo. The lovers intended to get married, but his family opposed it. In the eyes of the Oda family, it was a social and ethnic misalliance. Japanese-Korean mixed marriages were rare at the time due to the subordinate status of Koreans in Imperial Japan. She also was the daughter of an independence activist and pastor, and she abandoned her husband, who was disabled. Oda was the son of the Fusaku Oda, president of the Bank of Tokyo, and some of his ancestors were descendants of Japanese military generals from the Edo period (1603–1868). In 1922, Kim Iryŏp gave birth to an illegitimate son from this union, who was named Oda Masao. However, the son did not have close contact with his mother, because shortly after giving birth, she returned to Korea with the intention of pursuing the path of spiritual enlightenment as a Buddhist nun. Her son, however, was placed with adoptive families in Korea. At school, one of his teachers discovered his talent for painting. The biological father, who was raising his son, sent him to Sŏul to the renowned painter Kim Ŭnho (1892–1979), in whose house he lived and learned painting. As a painter, he was known under the pseudonym Iltang or Kim T'aeshin (1922-2014). Although he gained recognition in the artistic world, had a family and children, at the end of his life, like his mother, he entered a Buddhist monastery in 1988 and lived in the Chikchisa Temple. The fruit of his longing for his mother found a literary expression in the fictionalized memories about her, shown against the background of his dramatic life and the turbulent history of Korea. In the book *The Lost Mother*[26], he described, among other things, his first secret visit to his mother's Buddhist temple, which he made at the age of fourteen.

She also entered into a relationship with Kuk Kiyŏl (1892–1970), a political reporter at the *Tonga Ilbo*, and Pang Ingŭn (1899-1975), a writer, editor and publisher of *Chosŏn Mundan* founded in 1924. She was also in love with Yi Kwangsu but he rejected her.

Paek Sŏnguk (1897–1981), a Buddhist monk whom Kim Iryŏp fell in love with at first sight, had a significant impact on her life. However, their relationship was short-lived as Paek decided to embrace a monastic lifestyle and asceticism, cutting off all ties with the outside world.

Kim Iryŏp faced public mockery from male colleagues for her love life. Notably in the 'open letter' written by Kim Kijin for *Shinyŏsŏng* magazine, he expressed his disgust over her post-divorce cohabitation with another man. He suggested that her artistic

[25] Kim Myŏngsun contributed significantly to the development of modern Korean literature and women's emancipation in the 1920s. She came from the first generation of Korean students educated in Japan, who were introduced to new Japanese and Western literature there. In her works, she promoted the right of women to make decisions regarding marriage and preached a new morality. She advocated equal rights for women and men, rejecting life in a traditional relationship and cohabitation. Her views were strongly criticized by representatives of the patriarchal society. As a result, she was accused of immorality, promiscuity, and blind imitation of Western values and literary trends.

[26] Iltang [Kim Tae Shin], *The Lost Mother*, Bloomington 2008.

pursuits might be a cover for moral flaws, criticizing her bold expression of female sexuality as a distorted form of individualism and asserting that her openness only underscored her ignorance.[27]

This dissonance ultimately led Kim Iryŏp to explore a new path, turning towards Buddhism in pursuit of mystical experiences.

2. A BUDDHIST NUN

Over the course of time, her perspective underwent a profound transformation, steering away from the tenets of Christianity and veering towards the teachings of Buddhism. Kim Iryŏp's initial introduction to Buddhism dates back to 1923, when she found herself deeply moved by a dharma talk delivered by Zen Master Man'gong (1871–1946).[28] Even though she continued to contribute articles to magazines throughout the late 1930s, articulating her thoughts on women's and familial issues, her once resonant voice as a New Woman and a feminist writer gradually fell silent. This marked the commencement of a new chapter in her journey as a Buddhist nun.

The years spanning from 1927 to 1933 marked a period of transition in Kim Wŏnju's life, a prelude to her eventual withdrawal from the secular realm and Christianity. Taking on the role of editor for the literary section of the Buddhist magazine *Pulgyo* (*Buddhism*) in 1927, a magazine steered by the Buddhist poet Han Yongun (1879–1944), she found herself grappling with significant intellectual and emotional quandaries. During this time, she produced limited written work as she navigated through the complexities of her evolving beliefs.

In the early 1930s, her poetic expressions found a home in the pages of the *Pulgyo* magazine, although sporadic essays and short stories made appearances in other publications. As a Christian during her early adulthood, her acquaintance with Buddhism was modest. However, from 1927 onward, she immersed herself deeply in Buddhist teachings. With a palpable enthusiasm, she chronicled her journey into Buddhism, a newfound exploration that would ultimately shape her transformative path.

I cannot say that I understood Buddhist teaching at that time, which is both ordinary and profound, but I could at least feel clearly that Buddhism is definitely good. I also believed that Buddhist teaching was something comprehensive that could save not only me as an individual, but the entire world, and the entire universe as well. My heart was filled with a desire to learn, but I was not even sure what I should know, what I wanted to know, or what I should ask of whom regarding Buddhism, but all the same, the idea that I should let other people learn about Buddhism became urgent.[29]

In 1929, Kim Iryŏp entered into a second marriage, this time with Ha Yunshil, a former celibate Buddhist monk affiliated with the journal of *Buddhism*. However, their union proved to be brief, as the couple parted ways through divorce in 1931.

[27] J. Rhee, "No Country...," p. 412.

[28] Jin Y. Park, *Women and Buddhist Philosophy Engaging Zen Master Kim Iryŏp*, Honolulu 2017, p. 10.

[29] Ibid., p. 84.

In 1930, Kim Iryŏp marked a significant milestone by publishing her inaugural essay on *Buddhism* titled: "Pulmunʼujok i chunyŏn-e" (The Second Anniversary of Being a Buddhist)[30] and in 1931, her second essay, "Sin Pulkwa na-ŭi kajŏng" (Buddhist Practice and My Family)[31], offering insights into her new life as a married lay Buddhist practitioner. During this period, she delved into extensive reading of introductory books on Buddhism and immersed herself in the practice of meditation. Unexpectedly, at the age of thirty-eight in 1933, she made a radical departure from her past life, severing ties and embracing a transformative journey. Kim Iryŏp took a decisive step into the realm of a Buddhist monastery for women, initiating a chapter in her life defined by spiritual dedication and contemplation.[32] After entering the Buddhist temple Sŏbongam on Mount Kŭmgang (Diamond Mountain) in June 1933, Kim adopted her Buddhist name Hayôp, meaning Lotus Petal. This event became a media sensation and the press publicized her conversion. The feminist phase of Kim Iryŏpʼs life has come to an end. In 1935, she published another essay titled "Puldo-rŭl taggŭmyŏ" (Practicing Buddhism)[33] and then stopped publishing her writings for the next twenty years, following the advice of her revered Zen (sŏn) dharma master. In the work *Manʼgong taehwasang ŭl chʼumo hayŏ* (Memory of Great Master Manʼgong), she confessed that she stopped reading and writing 'for ten-some years' after the master advised her to do so.[34] She resumed publishing occasional essays on Buddhist themes in the early 1950s. She was active in progressive Buddhist publications and cooperated with Buddhist monks and scholars, such as Kwŏn Sangno (1879–1965) and Paek Sŏnguk.[35] Ultimately, she found in Buddhism a way to solve her existential crisis which occurred to her after the failure of her feminist activity in colonial Korea.

Kim Iryŏp also known as Hayŏp underwent several Buddhist trainings as part of her spiritual journey. In 1936, she stayed in a Zen meditation hall for nuns at Kyŏnsŏng Hermitage (Kyŏnsŏnggam). Next, she was sent to Chikchi Monastery (Chikchisa) in Kimchʼŏn, Kyŏngbuk Province, Sŏbongam and Mahayŏn on Mount Kŭmgang and Sŏnhakwŏn in Sŏul. Finally, in 1936, she established her abode in Sudŏk Monastery (Sudŏksa), where she would spend the remainder of her life dedicated to her spiritual pursuits.

The role of women in Korean Buddhism has a long history. Becoming a Buddhist nun was a common life option for many daughters of the ruling elites of the Silla Kingdom (57 BCE–935 CE and Koryŏ (935–1392 It was during the Koryŏ era that

[30] Kim Iryŏp, *Pulmunʼujok i chunyŏn-e* (The Second Anniversary of Being a Buddhist), in Kim U-yŏng, (ed.), *Kim Iryŏp Sŏnjip*..., pp. 315-319.

[31] Kim U-yŏng (ed.), *Kim Iryŏp Sŏnjip*..., 335-337.

[32] Kim Iryŏp, *Reflections of a Zen Buddhist Nun*, translated and with an introduction by Jin Y. Park, Honolulu 2014, p. 8.

[33] Kim U-yŏng (ed.), *Kim Iryŏp Sŏnjip*..., 356-361.

[34] Jin Y. Park, *Women and Buddhist Philosophy*..., pp. 91–92.

[35] E.S. Nelson, "Kim Iryopʼs Existential Buddhism: Reflections of a Zen Buddhist Nun," *Philosophy East and West*, vol. 66, no. 3 (2016), p. 1051.

Buddhism thrived most vigorously, exerting a profound influence on Korean art, literature, and architecture. However, the ascendancy of Neo-Confucianism during the Chosŏn dynasty led to the erosion of Buddhism's social and religious prominence. Over the 500-year Neo-Confucian Chosŏn period (1392–1910), Buddhism faced a decline, marked by the destruction of numerous temples and the disintegration of the order of Buddhist nuns. During the Japanese colonial occupation, Buddhism, superseded by Neo-Confucianism and emerging Christianity, survived in a dissipated state.

The subsequent Japanese colonial occupation from 1910 brought further challenges. Buddhism, once surpassed by Neo-Confucianism and the rising tide of Christianity, endured a period of diffusion. The colonial government, favoring Christianity and introducing restrictions on Buddhism while actively promoting the state religion of Shintō[36], imposed additional constraints.

Notwithstanding these adversities, the resurgence of female Buddhist monasticism gained momentum in the 1930s, coinciding with efforts to modernize Buddhist doctrine. This period marked a pivotal moment as women rekindled their connection with Buddhism, initiating a process of rejuvenation and adaptation in response to the evolving socio-religious landscape.

As a Buddhist nun, Kim Iryŏp practiced meditation called *hwadu* in order to achieve enlightenment. *Hwadu* meditation practice, initiated by Pojo Chinul (1158–1210), has become the dominant form of Zen Buddhist practice in Korea.[37] Through *hwadu* meditation, she found a sanctuary to transcend the challenges presented by a male-dominated society, redirecting her focus inward. She began to realize the profound essence of Buddhism and felt that its teaching *could save not only me as an individual but the entire world, and the entire universe as well*.[38] In the Buddhist idea of non-self, Iryŏp discovered a novel path to attain liberated selfhood, quite distinct from early feminist liberation.

As an influential Buddhist nun, Kim Iryŏp dealt with religious issues and sought to describe human existence from the point of view of a religious worldview. In her collection of essays titled "Ŏnŭ sudoin-ŭi hoesang" (Reflections of a Zen Buddhist Nun 1960), she described various aspects of her life and her views on the meaning of faith, religion, and her attitude to Christianity and Buddhism. She also creatively reinterpreted the Buddhist doctrine. In these highly personal essays, Kim asked some basic questions about her existence. How can I come to terms with my own personality, and what value does my existence have? How can I achieve freedom and how can I become a genuine self in a situation in which I am unfree and 'have lost myself'? How various dimensions of love should be understood in the context of Buddhist teachings? What

[36] As part of Japan's colonial policy, Shintō was established in Korea to symbolize Japanese authority and promote loyalty to the Japanese emperor. The promotion of Shintō in Korea was a deliberate strategy by the Japanese colonial government to reinforce the political and cultural domination of Korea and to integrate Koreans into the Japanese imperial state.

[37] Jin Y. Park, Introduction to Kim Iryŏp, *Reflections of a Zen Buddhist Nun*..., p. 13.

[38] Jin Y. Park, *Women and Buddhist Philosophy*..., p. 10.

is Buddhist awakening and how can it be achieved? She also reflected on how to understand God, what is the relationship between good and evil, and explained the meaning of religious practice. She seems to have found in Buddhist practice solutions to her existential and social alienation. The book became an instant bestseller in the Republic of Korea.

In the Preface (Chapter 1) Kim Iryŏp declares that her book is *a subtle attempt at proselytizing Buddhist teachings to help readers come to the realization that, having lost ourselves, we need to find and know our real selves so that we can become real human beings*.[39] Chapters 2 and 3 ('Life' and 'Buddhism and Culture') offer a philosophical discussion of the main tenets of Buddhism. The author claims that *(since) we have lost our original mind, we fail to ask the fundamental questions about human existence* (p. 34). The next two essays (4 and 5) contain personal memories of how Kim Iryŏp learned dharma from her Zen master Man'gong, a Buddhist monk, independence activist, scholar, poet, writer, and philosopher, who promoted the modern revival of Zen Buddhism, and how she decided to choose monastic life. Chapters 6 and 7 are devoted to social issues and the reform movement in Korean Buddhism in the 1950s. Chapters 8 and 9 deal with religious issues. Chapters 10 and 11, in the form of personal letters to two men with Kim had relationships prior to entering the Buddhist monastery (*The Path to No-Mind* and *Having Burned Away My Youth*), provide reflections from the Buddhist perspective. Chapters 12 and 13 are personal letters written to Kim Iryŏp. The second part of the book contains four essays revealing the evolution of Kim Iryŏp's Buddhist worldview.

In 1962, Kim Iryŏp published her second book, a short autobiographical novel, *Ch'ŏngch'un-ŭl pulsarŭgo* (I Buried My Youth), which caused a great stir and attracted the attention of many readers because the author wrote it after thirty years of silence. In 1964, she published her last work, *Haengbokkwa pulhaeng-ŭi kalp'i-esŏ* (Between Happiness and Misfortune), in which she took on the role of a counselor, giving advice to all who suffer from both happy and unhappy love experiences.

As the Buddhist sage Kim Iryŏp finally achieved peace and enlightenment. In the last year of her life, she confessed: *From birth to this day, I have followed bumpy paths to this mountain. Past worries were suddenly forgotten*.[40] She died on February 1, 1971. In her honor, a five-story pagoda was built at the Sudŏksa temple.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The life and work of Kim Iryŏp is an example of a dramatic confrontation of the New Woman with the modernity of colonial Korea. As an extremely intelligent and talented woman, she managed to have a significant impact on the formation of the

[39] Kim Iryŏp, *Reflections of a Zen Buddhist Nun*..., p. 31.

[40] Bonnie Bongwan Cho Oh, "Kim Iryŏp: Pioneer Writer/Reformer in Colonial Korea," *Transactions of Royal Asiatic Society Korea Branch*, vol. 71 (1996), p. 25.

woman's question and feminism in Korean literature. She believed in the social service of literature and was a supporter of social reforms and women's emancipation. Her life and professional career are seen as the paradigmatic model of the first generation of modern women intellectuals. The rich and varied literary and journalistic work of Kim Iryŏp reveals evolution in her worldview. Being an outstanding intellectual and sensitive feminist, she unsuccessfully appealed for an improvement in the status of her gender in a modernizing Korea and for a re-evaluation of the fundamental principles governing women's lives, which – in Kim Iryŏp's opinion – were not only discriminatory, but downright oppressive. She proclaimed the need to introduce equality between men and women and the need to give women the right to decide independently about their fate. Moreover, she called for their social and moral awakening. Her fight for their rights, although it did not bring immediate results, combined with the efforts of other 'new women', such as Kim Myŏngsun and Na Hyesŏk, as well as women associated with women's organizations, resulted in a gradual but progressive westernization of the lifestyle of the young generation of women, especially women educated and employed in large urban centres – women who have gained financial independence, and thus also, although to a limited extent, social and personal independence.

The long break in Kim Iryŏp's literary work is significant. Her silence can be interpreted not only as a kind of protest against the Japanese occupation of Korea, and then against the tragedy of the Korean Civil War, but also as a desire to distance herself from the short feminist episode in her life. This desire was to some extent respected by her compatriots who, for the next few decades, until the 1980s, bearing in mind that Kim Iryŏp spent most of her adult life, almost forty years, in a Buddhist monastery and devoted herself to the teachings of the Buddha. The silence was broken in the 1980s by the media, which brought to light Kim Iryŏp's unconventional personal life, affairs, marriages and divorces, giving these experiences an air of sensationalism. The media information also aroused the interest of academic circles and feminist organizations, which undertook serious research into her life and writings. The results of this research enriched knowledge about Kim Iryŏp's literary achievements and also contributed to deepening the knowledge about the beginnings of the Korean feminist trend. Research work carried out over the last three decades has resulted in the creation of many articles and monographic works that have restored Kim Iryŏp to her rightful status.

The two phases of Kim Iryŏp's life, first as a New Woman writer and activist, and next as a leading Zen Buddhist thinker reveal her anxiety to achieve personal freedom. In her first phase, she considered personal freedom on a gendered level: as an active feminist at the forefront of the women's liberation movement in colonial Korea, she was concerned with ways of overcoming the subjugation of women in a Confucian society; whereas as a Zen Buddhist nun she completely abandoned her feminist commitment and concentrated on existential and religious issues, advocating that Buddhism as a religion offers not only a unique guidance to human beings, but also allows one to achieve enlightenment and nirvana, i.e. release from earthly suffering.

Ill. 2.The Buddhist nun Kim Iryŏp,
source: https://www.ggbn.co.kr/news/articleView.html?idxno=54443

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Anna DINIEJKO-WĄS – PhD, assistant professor at the Department of Korean Studies at the University of Warsaw. Specializes in cultural studies, Korean studies and English studies.