Yi Kwang-su had been a man of letters more than a writer of fiction, probably the most distinguished, if controversial, Korean man of letters from the mid-1910s through the 1930s. During these years he not only produced a stream of full-length novels and short stories but also a large number of newspaper columns and powerfully argued provocative essays on some of the most critical issues of his time, such as the custom of early and arranged marriage, filial obligations, the place and rights of women in family and society, and the need for educational reform. It may indeed be the case that his writings on these issues were far more important than the body of his fiction, even though he has often been called the father of the modern Korean novel. It has been exactly 90 years since Mujông, Yi’s landmark first full-length novel, was serialized in Maeil Sinbo in 1917. And in 2005 an English version translated by Yi’s granddaughter, Ann Sung-hi Lee, was published.

Nearly one hundred years after its publication, does Mujông still deserve to be read either in Korean or in translation? For older Korean readers and those interested in modern Korean literature, this would not be a problematic question, since they would want to read it, if they have not already done so, if only for its historical significance. But what about younger Korean readers as well as those reading it in translation? I raise this question because of a response I got from a young Korean American friend when I asked him what he thought of the novel in its English translation. I was dismayed to hear him compare the novel to the daytime American soaps. Afterwards, thinking over what he said, I wondered if he responded as he did only because he had not understood Mujông’s place in the history of the modern Korean novel.

I had mixed feelings as I reread Mujông. I no longer felt the rush of excitement I once experienced when I first read it as a young boy, and even though I enjoyed rereading it, I was also annoyed by its sentimentality. I could sympathize with my young Korean American friend’s dismissive comment, but at the same time I could see its importance in the development of the modern Korean novel.

In the original Korean version, it is not difficult to see how Yi struggled with forging the modern han’gul prose style in composing Mujông. Although he mostly succeeds, it is also clear how tentative he must have been, because we see him now and then slipping back to the manner of the earlier oral narrative style, as though he were delivering an oral recitation rather than a written narrative. This, I think, was the reason for the frequent shifts between the past and present tense (especially in the first half of the novel), along with the too frequent use of an odd, superfluous sentence-ending verb, hayôtta.

The narrative, too, is organized on a contrast between the old and the new. Not only is it divided into two equal halves, it’s also full of contrasting details: new-fangled things such as riding on the train and trams, sending telegrams, Japanese emigrants on the Pusan-Sinuiju train, Japan-educated Korean students, and
new-style secondary schools, all of which stand in sharp contrast to the old people and their thoughts and ways of life which are in the process of gradually passing away.

More significantly, these contrasting narrative details help to bring into focus the central theme of the novel, the stumbling beginnings of a new world and new consciousness gradually emerging out of the old world and old ways of thinking. This is why, as has been pointed out by Prof. Kim Yung-Hee, the first half of the novel deals mainly with the Hyông-sik—Yông-ch’ae story, which is centered on the rejection of the old myths of virtuous and filial women, specifically the myths of Shimch’ong and Ch’un-hyang, as shown in the disastrous consequences of Yông-ch’ae’s efforts at self-sacrifice on behalf of her father and Hyông-sik.

And this seems to be the reason why at the conclusion of the first half, even though Hyông-sik believes Yông-ch’ae has drowned herself in the Taedong River, he is filled with a sense of exhilaration, “tremendous happiness” (p.221), as he returns to Seoul from Pyongyang after his half-hearted attempt to rescue or locate Yông-ch’ae. He seems hugely relieved at escaping the burden of his memory of Yông-ch’ae and exhilarated with the prospect of a new life beckoning to him.

In the emerging new world, the lives of women are not to be dedicated to fulfilling their traditional filial and spousal obligations. Their greatest obligation is to themselves, to live and grow according to their own wishes and potential. It is to underscore this point that Byông-uk, Japan-educated “new woman,” tells Yông-ch’ae: “From now on, you must live according to your own wishes ” (p. 273), thereby releasing Yông-ch’ae from her guilt-driven impulse to drown herself in the Taedong River. Hyông-sik, a reform-minded young man, also Japan-educated, underscores the same point when he tells his journalist friend U-sôn that his fiancée Sôn-hyông would choose for herself what course of study she will pursue in America, for “[N]owadays a husband cannot restrict his wife’s freedom. . . . There is such a thing as the ‘self,’ you see. Everyone has the right to do what they want to do”(p.262).

But the glimpses of the emerging new world and its new awareness, which make up the second half of the novel, are not free of the dark shadows of the first half of the novel. An emerging new awareness about the proper relationship between children and parents and man and woman, built on individual freedom and equality, turns out to be no more than an ideal still to be achieved. The author underscores this point in both Hyông-sik's engagement to Sôn-hyông, as well as the “resurrection” of Yông-ch’ae.

A marriage arranged for and finalized by parents has neither personal nor moral validity. In order for it to be valid, it has to be entered into by the willing consent and desires of the man and woman directly involved. This is why even after their formal engagement, Hyông-sik insists on a personal assurance from Sôn-hyông of her love for him, because he believes what is essential is not their engagement but love for each other (p.289). But, even as Hyông-sik declares his love for Sôn-hyông, his words sound largely theoretical, for he has not yet come to know Sôn-hyông long or well enough to feel genuine love for her. What Hyông-sik means is he must love her, since he has willingly entered into their engagement, because he would otherwise be guilty of deception and self-deception. As for Sôn-hyông, she is uncertain of both herself and her feelings for Hyông-sik:

“Neither knew each other’s personality. Hyông-sik’s love for Sôn-hyông was like love for a beautiful flower. He loved her because she was lovable to the sight. It was a very superficial love. A love between two pairs of eyes, and two faces. Their spirits had not yet met even once.” (p.255)

Yông-ch’ae’s “resurrection,” that is, her development into a liberated “new woman,” seems even more unreal, for it is brought about altogether by Byông-uk’s and her family’s overgenerous gift of friendship
and assistance. And even for Byông-uk, as much as for Yông-ch’ae, their status of “new womanhood” is shadowed by an insistent reminder of the past, embodied in the sad fate of Byông-uk’s sister-in-law, who is entrapped in a loveless early marriage, which the author does not let us forget even while he allows us to enjoy the rehabilitation of Yông-ch’ae. In this way, Yi Kwang-su shows us how uneven and uncertain the birth of a new world with its new understanding of family and spousal relationships had been in 1917. It has taken another 90 years for this vision of the ideal to become even partly realized in Korea.

Nearly overnight, Mujông made Yi Kwang-su Korea’s most admired novelist. What made the novel such a success? More than the novel’s accomplished prose and its physical and psychological realism, it probably owed its success to the author’s vision of an emerging new world of greater personal freedom, autonomy, and equality in family and spousal relationships. This aspect of the novel, as has been suggested by Prof. Kim Yung-Hee, shows its kinship to the writings of the first generation of modern Korean women writers of the early 1920s.

Those of us interested in modern Korean literature are indebted to Ann Sung-Hi Lee for making this full text of Mujông available in English in a thoroughly researched and readable translation.

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