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Displacing the Christian Theodicy of Hell: Yi Kwangsu's Search for the Willful Individual in Colonial Modernity

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Abstract: This article aims to offer Yi Kwangsu's *The Heartless* (*Mujŏng*, 1917), the first modern Korean novel, as an emblem of hybrid religiosity in colonial modernity that sheds light on an ambivalent alterity in the problem of hell in non-Western cultures. To the extent that the problem of hell in Christianity pertains to the question of why God allows evil to exist eternally, God's omnipotent authority with justice and fairness beyond the grave is placed at the center of the inquiry into the ultimate standard of moral goodness the religious feasibility of which justifies the existence of sinners suffering eternal damnation in hell. But the co-existence of the omnipotent God and unrepentant sinners is not always questioned in the religiosity of hell in non-Western cultures. The Christian imaginary of hell in non-Western cultures often demarcates the question of God's sovereignty from the sufferings of sinners in the problem of hell. Based on these observations, this article will investigate Yi's narratives of hell in *The Heartless*, which are associated with Christianity but intertwined with his ethical demands for shaping a new individuality beyond the traditional hybrid religiosity of hell. Specifically, first, we will show that Yi's Christian imaginary of hell is reformulated through the traditional imaginaries of hell in which, regardless of the existence of God's sovereignty over the created order, the sufferings of sinners in hell function to secure social norms and orders. In doing so, we claim that the Christian imaginary of hell in *The Heartless* is relegated to a rhetorical means to beget the need for the self-awakening of the inner-self through which individual desires can be freed from the influences of Confucian morality as well as Christian theodicy. Second, in comparison with Lu Xun's sympathetic relocation of Christian spirituality within the traditional Chinese imaginaries of hell in his longing for modern subjectivity, we explore Yi's hybrid religiosity within colonial modernity, the vitality of which cannot be confined within the simple dichotomy between Western and non-Western cultures. At this juncture, the upshot of Yi's hybrid religiosity within colonial modernity is that the theodicy of hell in Christianity can be displaced and thereby disenfranchised from the centrality of the search for a new individuality.

Keywords: Yi Kwangsu; Lu Xun; Christianity; Confucianism; theodicy of hell

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1. Introduction

The problem of hell in Christianity, which has been juxtaposed with the problem of eternal punishment in hell for the damned, pertains to the question of why omnipotent God allows evil to exist eternally. And to this extent, God's omnipotent authority with justice and fairness beyond the grave is often placed at the center of the inquiry into the ultimate standard of moral evil, the religious impermissibility of which justifies the existence of sinners suffering eternal damnation in hell. The Christian traditionalists who

have interpreted the problem of eternal punishment in hell as the ultimate realization of divine justice put forward the compatibility of God's being perfectly good with the existence of eternal suffering in hell (Kvanvig 1993, pp. 25–66; Spiegel 2015; Hartman 2023). When they presuppose that there should be a clear boundary between the saved and the damned in divine justice, the problem of hell is frequently replaced with the deterrent effect of eternal punishment on those who could otherwise be damned by the demands of divine justice. And, when they see that all, including the damned in hell, will be redeemed ultimately by heavenly grace, the existence of eternal punishment in hell itself vindicates God's perfect goodness, as it is surely not so much permanent as transitory without damning humankind eternally.

These traditional redistributive views, regardless of the emphasis on the salvation of the saved or the ultimate redemption of all mankind, have been seriously challenged by various objections particularly given the existence of the damned in hell whose existence is thoroughly dominated or preoccupied by evils (Talbott 1990; Adams 1993; Sider 2002; Kershnar 2005). For the critics of the traditional redistributive views, God's omnipotent authority still remains questionable. If the damned should be punished by eternal suffering, God's sovereignty should be questioned because it allows for evils to triumph, at least over unrepentant sinners. And even if all, including the damned, will ultimately be saved by divine bliss, God's benevolence itself appears to be tyrannical due to its arbitrary cutting off of the unsaved, who should lead their earthly lives under the power of evil. In these objections, the problem of hell is inconsistent with the restorative nature of divine justice as well as with God's omnipotent authority.

However, the co-existence of God's omnipotent authority with eternal punishment of unrepentant sinners in hell is not always questioned in the religiosity of hell in non-Western cultures. For instance, in Buddhist theodicy, the habitants of hell are sinners being punished, not by divine justice, but by their actions in this and previous lives (Repp 2007; Burley 2014). Thus, in Buddhism, the suffering of sinners in hell does not formulate the problem of hell as it does in Christianity. In Confucianism, the punishment of sinners usually relates to the problem of "evil" rather than that of hell. Despite differences between Confucian thinkers with respect to the innate nature of humans as virtuous, Confucians emphatically admit the existence of evil and its negative effects on humanity (Cheung 2007; Perkins 2014, pp. 116–50). Nevertheless, in the Confucian non-theistic context, we scarcely find a tension between God's sovereignty and the existence of evil in the general consideration of the problem of good and evil.

Along the same lines, the Christian imaginary of hell that has been localized in Northeast Asian cultures often demarcates God's omnipotent sovereignty from the eternal suffering of sinners in the problem of hell. This demarcation of God's sovereignty has been shaped through the variegated interplays of local cultures with Christianity. The Confucian concept of "*xiao*" (family reverence), which is firmly rooted in the Confucian genealogy of family from one's most remote ancestor, is gradually interwoven with Sinophone-based Christian practices (Guo 2022). Spiritual practitioners in South Korea put an emphasis on the Confucian conception of self-discipline as an imperative way of subordinating oneself to the divinity (Baker 2008, pp. 94–121; Kwak 2023). And, as we can see from Shintoistic Christian evangelism during the Meiji period and the "Non-Church" Christian movement in Japan, the cultural elasticity of Japanese Christian practices has been integrated into the distinctive features of Japanese Christian religiosity (Van Bragt 1984; Kodera 1987; Iwai 2008). The upshot of the hybrid religiosities in Northeast Asian Christianity is that, unlike in the debates in Western Christian cultures, the eternal suffering of unrepentant sinners in hell is as just as God's divine bliss over the saved.

Based on these observations, this article will investigate Yi's narratives of hell in *The Heartless* (*Mujŏng*, 1917), which are associated with Christianity but intertwined with his ethical demands for shaping a new individuality beyond the traditional hybrid religiosity of hell. Specifically, first, we will show that Yi's Christian imaginary of hell is reformulated through the traditional imaginaries of hell in which, regardless of the existence of God's sovereignty over the created order, the sufferings of sinners in hell function to secure social norms and orders. In doing so, we claim that the Christian imaginary of hell in *The Heartless* is relegated to a rhetorical mean to beget the need for the self-awakening of the inner-self through which individual desires can be freed from the influences of Confucian morality as well as Christian theodicy. Second, in comparison with Lu Xun's sympathetic relocation of Christian spirituality within the traditional Chinese imaginaries of hell in his longing for modern subjectivity, we explore Yi's hybrid religiosity within colonial modernity, the vitality of which cannot be confined within the simple dichotomy between Western and non-Western cultures. At this juncture, the upshot of Yi's hybrid religiosity within colonial modernity is that the theodicy of hell in Christianity can be displaced and thereby disenfranchised from the centrality of the search for new subjectivity.

2. The Christian Religiosity of Hell in *Mujŏng*

Despite the notoriety of his collaboration with the Japanese colonial government, Yi Kwangsu (1892–1950), is one of the most distinguished writers in early modern Korean literature, occupying a unique place in its history (A. S.-H. Lee 2005, pp. 1–74). He is highly reputed as a representative novelist who ushered in Korea's modern vernacular literature, and he is widely known as an enlightenment figure whose literary works were aimed at convincing his contemporaries of the inevitable departure from the traditional past by disseminating a set of modern evaluative ideals such as individual subjectivity. In addition, although his pro-Japanese collaboration in the 1940s obscures the fact that he was a cultural nationalist who advocated "cultural reform" for national independence, he played an important role in composing "the February 8th Declaration of Independence", which sparked the March 1st Uprising of 1919 in Korea. More importantly, with respect to the subject of this paper, we note that he was the author of the first mature modern novel in Korea, *The Heartless* (*Mujŏng*, 1917). With this novel, his place in the history of modern Korean literature has been compared with Lu Xun's in China and Natsume Soseki's in Japan.[1]

However, the hybrid religiosity of hell in *The Heartless* has not, so far, been analyzed carefully. Although Yi's descriptions of hell in *The Heartless*, chiefly associated with Christianity, cannot be separated from his advocacy of cultural reform, the religious aspects of Yi's descriptions of hell in *The Heartless* have been unduly simplified through his intention to question the rules and norms under the hegemony of Confucianism in his time. What he aims at through his hybrid religiosity of hell in *The Heartless* is not simply a cultural reform of Korean society by means of Christianity versus Confucianism.[2] It is also a dislocation of the Christian religiosity that had reinforced the dysfunctional hierarchy of the past and was thereby gradually interwoven with the Confucian ideals of becoming a virtuous person in the Korean society of his time.[3] Ironically, it has often been overlooked by those who comment on Yi's intentional efforts to form a new subjectivity that the hybrid religiosity of hell in *The Heartless* retains his own convoluted attitudes toward Christianity by making his readers ask themselves questions about what to believe or desire (M. D. Shin 1999; Yang 2017; Choi 2018). For Yi, this being persuasive, the hybrid religiosity of hell in *The Heartless* will become a strong basis on which to know what his readers believe and where individual affections may involve a qualified subjectivity for the reconstruction of the Korean society of his time.

From the beginning of the novel, we reckon that Yi has a dubious stance toward Christianity. A number of Christian terms and stories from the Bible signify that Yi had a rich knowledge of Christianity. There is no doubt about his knowledge of Christianity, since he was always surrounded with Christian converts and he himself taught his neighbors the Bible when he was in charge of the Osan school in 1911. But, concomitantly, he discloses his contempt for the Christians of his time as well. He describes the protagonist of the novel, Ri Hyŏngsik, as a churchgoer without faith in the church. At this juncture, he insinuates that Hyŏngsik had become a pessimistic and absurd churchgoer given that the hierarchy of the Christian church does not appear to be much different from a social club. Accordingly, Hyŏngsik felt sick of the church when he saw young men who lacked any knowledge of the Bible or moral virtue become deacons and stewards through their close relationship with the pastor or the elders (Yi 2023, pp. 14–15). For Hyŏngsik, all the Christians of his time are nothing but snobs. And such a critical stance toward the Christian church of his time in Korea can be found from Yi's article, entitled "Problems of the Christian Church in Korea These Days", which was published in *Ch'ŏngch'un* [青春: Youth] a few months after he finished the newspaper serialization of *The Heartless* in 1917.

> First, the Christian church of Korean society these days is too hierarchical. The thought of hierarchy has been deeply anchored in East Asian societies, and in particular, it has been deeply rooted in the psyche of the Korean peoples……Even in the Christian church that should be based on equality between members, this notion of hierarchy cannot be shaken at all. Thus we come to see that there is a hierarchical rank in the church like the four social classes of the past and it has become almost ineradicable. (Yi 1917b, p. 76: *translated by the authors*)

In the article, Yi lays out four defects of the Korean Church of his time: hierarchy, church centrism, the ignorance of church leaders, and belief in superstitions. And he particularly pinpoints the first problem of hierarchy in the Christian church as the most pernicious fault that should be rectified immediately. As we can see above, for Yi, the hierarchical order of the Korean church was as unjust as the four classes of Joseon (Chosŏn) society, and it had been shaped and enhanced by the social norms and customs of the traditional past in which freedom and equality, which are the most important conditions for cultivating modern individuality, were structurally and spiritually constrained by Confucianism. With the renewal of a Confucian hierarchy in the Korean church, the Christian church functioned as another patriarchal family in which the church leaders acted like fathers or officials in the backward past whose authority was not based on their intellectual capabilities or their moral virtues but on the irrational and blind habituation of compliance with hierarchical orders. Yi even laments that "becoming a pastor is now taken to be something like becoming an official with honor and power in the past" (Yi 1917b, p. 77). In short, Yi was sarcastic about the Korean Christian church as well as the Christians of his time, much as Hyŏngsik felt nauseated by them.

In this context, the first mention of hell in *The Heartless* is crucial for seeing Yi's convoluted attitudes toward the Christianity of his time.[4]

> She [Sŏnhyŏng] memorized lines from the Bible. But she only knew them by rote. She believed that God made Adam and Eve, and she memorized word-for-word the passages about how all evils such as old age and death entered the world because Eve was seduced by the serpent into plucking and eating the forbidden fruit of knowledge. She memorized words about heaven and hell, and Jesus on the cross, exactly as they were written in the Bible. She knew what she read every day on the third page of the newspaper—reports of robbery, fraud, adultery, people who died of starvation, people who committed suicide by hanging, etc. She even told her friends about these reports. However, she gave no further

> thought to all those things. These matters would rather have nothing to do with her thoughts. Actually, she never even tried to think about whether or not such matters had any relation to herself. (Yi 2023, pp. 108–9; Yi 2005, p. 136, *slightly revised*)[5]

Sŏnhyŏng was born into a rich Christian family. Her father, Elder Kim, is the leader of a Protestant church in Seoul. For Hyŏngsik, Elder Kim appears to be nothing but a typical leader of a Korean church whose authority is not based on his knowledge of the Bible or sincere faith in God. What we can presume from Hyŏngsik's narratives is that Elder Kim might have become an elder because of his wealth and his manner of gentry conduct had yet to be refined by modernity. In Hyŏngsik's eyes, he is another Christian snob. In contrast, Sŏnhyŏng, who is going to learn English from him to prepare for studying abroad in the United States, is not snobbish. He thinks of her as "virginal" (*sun'gyŏl*: 纯洁) and "pure" (*ch'ŏngjŏng*: 清净). For him, she is rather like Eve before she ate the forbidden fruit of the tree of life. She memorizes lines in the Bible, and she knows of the eternal sufferings of the damned in hell. But she acts as if she has not known of evils. More correctly, she acts like a shameless Eve who knows of good and evil while not wanting to admit that she is a sinner. In other words, she does not feel any shame before God although she knows of human vulnerability. Yi juxtaposes her absurd innocence with becoming a "person" (*saram*).

> She [Sŏnhyŏng] was not yet a person. Since she had grown up in a Christian family, she had received the baptism of heaven. However, she had not yet received the fiery baptism of life. Had she been born in a "civilized" state, she would have received the baptism of life through poetry, fiction, music, art and storytelling from the early ages of seven or eight, or perhaps four or five, and now that she was eighteen years old, she would have been a woman who was a real person with life. Sŏnhyŏng was not yet, however, a 'person'. The 'person' within Sŏnhyŏng had not yet awakened. No one but God knew whether or not she would awaken. (Yi 2023, p. 109; Yi 2005, p. 136, *slightly revised*)

As we can see above, the shameless Sŏnhyŏng before God is considered "matter" to be formed. Although she received the baptism of God's grace, she is still not grown up enough to be a real "person". At this juncture, Yi presents an interesting view of humanity that is thoroughly different from the one offered in the Bible. The perfection of the first creation of men by God in which men do not know of evil in *Genesis* 2:25 is rejected, in the sense that the baptism of God's grace that makes men return from Original sin to divine justice cannot awaken "the person" within us. For Yi, the self-awakening of "the person" within us that makes us a real "person" grows only through our encounter with the "fiery baptism of life" (*insaeng*, 人生).

More importantly, Yi does not think that the baptism of life should be given by God, although he says that God can know of the timing of its coming. Rather, the whole process of becoming a real person largely depends on our experiences with which we discover ourselves as a "person" with desires as well as a "person" with thoughts and senses. At this juncture, Sŏnhyŏng's absurd innocence indicates nothing but immaturity, as Hyŏngsik says that "she was the same as when she had been born" (Yi 2023, p. 109). By the same token, the momentous awakening of self-discovery needs to be liberated from God's sovereignty. Before the "self-awakening" of the person within us, we can be nothing but another Sŏnhyŏng whose knowledge of good and evil does not empower us to inquire into the truth about what we actually desire and what we really are. Sŏnhyŏng's awareness of bodily desires as a woman can help her awaken the person within her. But what should be the prerequisite for this awareness of being a "woman" is discovering one's autonomy. In short, the first description of hell in *The Heartless*, which is constructed through

Christian terms and stories from the Bible, paradoxically reveals his convoluted attitudes to God's sovereignty.

3. Hybrid Religiosity of Hell in *Mujŏng*

The specificity of the self-awakening of the "inner self" in *The Heartless* has been unduly simplified with the search for the modern self that has been considered the vitality of early modern literature in Northeast Asia. From this perspective, modernity or early modern literature frequently relates to a longing for progress toward an individualistic and rationalized society. At this juncture, more or less within the Weberian framework, the self-awakening of the inner self becomes detached from traditional religiosities conceptualized with social ties in the backward past, while the nature of modern individuality is identified with the capacity of rational agents to set goals for themselves. Along the same line, scholars who consider *The Heartless* as the first modern Korean novel tend to find its modernity in the search for individual selfhood (Hwang 2005; A. S.-H. Lee 2005, pp. 1–74; A. Lee 1992). What gets lost in this reading is Yi's critical appropriation of Christianity. They correctly point out that Yi's search for the inner self in *The Heartless* discredits the Confucian awakening of becoming a "virtuous" person. But the search for individuality as opposed to Confucian ethics in their readings locates Yi's critical stance against Christianity on a continuum that stretches all the way from his negativity about Confucianism. Similar problems can be found in the post-structural and gender-oriented readings of *The Heartless* (M. D. Shin 1999; Choi 2018; Textor 2024, pp. 39–58). In these readings, Yi's ambiguous departure from Christianity in *The Heartless* is largely underrated as an indication of a decisive break from the "backward" past or a desperate search for a new shelter in colonial modernity.

Yi Kwangsu admitted that Christianity played a crucial role in modernizing the Korean society of his time, as we can see from his outspoken remark that "Christian church is the first and greatest savior that has brought to dark Korea the dawning light of new civilization" (Yi 1917a, p. 13). However, we can also see that his non-Christian religious experiences helped decenter the problem of hell in Christian theodicy from his vision of "modern" individuality. He was critical of the Korean church of his time, the hierarchical structure of which reproduced Confucian rules and norms in the "backward" past (K.-C. Shin 2002; Jung 2024). Concomitantly, as we shall see in this section, he placed his concerns squarely on Christian theodicy, criticizing it for its failure to liberate individuals from traditional Confucian norms and its failure to grant Korean Christians the self-awakening of humane passions or individual desires.

First, as we can see from the second mention of hell in *The Heartless*, nowhere does Yi imply that the eternal sufferings of the damned in hell precede the ultimate salvation of all sinners by God or that they can be justified through divine justice. What makes the existence of hell worthy of portrayal for Yi is rather the Buddhist religiosity of hell that actions performed in one's lifetime forge the subsequent sufferings of sinners in hell. More rigidly speaking, his second portrayal of hell in *The Heartless* sheds light on a hybrid religiosity of the Buddhist notion of "action" (*karma*), which is unduly separated from that of "rebirth", with the Confucian precepts of moral virtue, which are figuratively characterized by Yŏngch'ae's lament over her fate as a *kisaeng* (female entertainer).

> Yŏngch'ae resolved to go to P'yŏngyang. If she was going to drown herself, she wanted to do it in the Taedong River, where her sisterly friend Wŏrhwa committed suicide. She wanted to go to P'yŏngyang and, first of all, visit the graves of her father and Wŏrhwa at Pungmang Mountain, and tell them all about how she had been. Her father had died before he had heard that she had become a *kisaeng*. She wanted to tell him that she sold herself to become a *kisaeng* in or-

> der to rescue her father and brothers from jail. She wanted to tell him that she had not soiled the flesh and blood that she had received from her father, in the seven years since she had become a *kisaeng*. She also wanted to tell him that she had guarded her chastity for the sake of Yi Hyŏngsik, to whom her father had betrothed her. If there was a soul after death, she wanted to relieve her bitter sorrow that she couldn't fulfil her filial duty to her father while he had been alive. If he had gone to heaven, she would look for him in heaven. If he had gone to hell, she would look for him in hell. (Yi 2023, p. 138; Yi 2005, p. 154, *revised*)

As we can see from Yi's portrayal of hell above, there is no indication of any "suffering" in hell. Although he uses the Buddhist schema of heaven and hell, the demonization of characters or actions are thoroughly absent. Yŏngch'ae, who became a *kisaeng*, one of the lowest classes in Chosŏn Korea under the rigid Confucian ethics (B. W. Lee 1979), shamelessly believed that she was separated from evils in the world even after she sold herself to have money to free her father and brothers. In other words, she depersonalized her social status by justifying her choice to be a *kisaeng* with the Confucian filial duty to her father. Thus, like Sŏnhyŏng, although Yŏngch'ae knew that there was good and evil, she thought that the world of evil and evil people had nothing to do with her (Yi 2023, p. 120). But, different from Sŏnhyŏng, whose acknowledgement of evils in the world came from her readings of the Bible and newspapers, Yŏngch'ae's awareness of the existence of evils in the world was formed by her actual experiences of the world of evil and evil people. At this juncture, Yŏngch'ae's intentional forgetting of evils in the world appears to be more likely an abrogation of self and is rooted in her early learning of the Confucian precepts of moral virtue (Yi 2023, p. 119). In short, her irony in this second portrayal of hell deliberately places Yŏngch'ae's pretentious innocence beyond any ethical judgement of good and evil and thereby relinquishes the pedagogical role of the Buddhist schema of heaven and hell.

Ethical implications behind the second portrayal of hell in *The Heartless* are ultimately set against the Confucian teachings of "becoming" a virtuous person. Yi elaborates even more explicitly on the social implications of Yŏngch'ae's pretentious innocence that he sees as an unavoidable consequence of Confucianism's robust influence. With an intentional detachment from her actual status, Yŏngch'ae refused to characterize remorsefully her misery as a consequence of her previous actions. But her pretentious innocence later turned out to be much more problematic than Sŏnhyŏng's absurd innocence when she was raped by Kim Hyŏnsu, who wanted to purchase Yŏngch'ae as a concubine (Yi 2023, p. 155). Yŏngch'ae believed that unless and as long as her chastity was intact, she would not be ashamed of becoming a *kisaeng*. But Yŏngch'ae's pride in her moral purity, which was anchored in the Confucian ethics of her time, was disrupted by the painful experience that she was considered by others as nothing but a *kisaeng*, a "special kind of species beyond all moralities and all ethics" whose chastity was not weighed in terms of what was considered virtuous (Yi 2023, pp. 156, 163–66). Immediately after her loss of chastity, her painful awakening to her social status did not inspire her to liberate herself from Confucian morality. She thought of the loss of chastity by force as her own sin, and she decided to commit suicide for the sake of proving her purity (Yi 2023, pp. 193–96). Nevertheless, her loss of chastity eventually played a significant role in liberating herself from Confucian ethics by inaugurating a new relationship with herself, termed as to "live according to one's own will" (Yi 2023, pp. 337–40, 343). In other words, the loss of chastity by force paradoxically provided her with the momentum for her self-awakening of the "person" within herself.

Second, the last portrayal of hell in *The Heartless* finally dislocates Confucian ethics as well as Christian theodicy from the self-awakening of the inner self. As the loss of chastity by force provided Yŏngch'ae with her autonomous will to be herself in the end, Sŏnhyŏng's

painstaking experience of "jealousy" over Yŏngch'ae made for the self-awakening of the person within herself. At this juncture, Christian theodicy, in which the negation of self or the abrogation of humane desires are prerequisite for being saved by God, is depicted as being as harmful for the self-awakening of the inner self as Confucian teachings of becoming virtuous. By the same token, in Yŏngch'ae's Christian imagining of hell, the suffering of the damned in hell is no longer associated with divine justice but depicted as a due process in the world of evil through which an "innocent child" is growing up to be a "person" (*saram*) (Yi 2023, p. 439). This eminently complicated proposition against the Christian theodicy of hell is dictated by the hybrid religiosity of the evilness of human nature in Christianity with the suffering of demons in Buddhism.

> Sŏnhyŏng was captured by such a horrible thought. She felt like her internal organs were entirely on fire, and sooty flames darting from her nose. The sound of her own panting breath seemed like that of a large demon standing beside her, blowing cold gusts of air on her. Her body seemed to be falling into a dark hell, just as she had imagined when studying the Bible. She shivered once, then looked around at the people dozing here and there in the train car. They too seemed to have become frightening demons. Any moment now, it seemed as though they would open their eyes glaringly and come running at her. (Yi 2023, p. 441; Yi 2005, p. 328, *slightly revised*)

Sŏnhyŏng learned that Yŏngch'ae was alive, and she was in the same train on the way to study in Japan. At the same time, she reckoned that because of this, Hyŏngsik, her fiancé, was struggling with feelings of guilt and shame. Then, she became preoccupied with "jealousy" for the first time in her life (Yi 2023, pp. 411, 434–40). And, overwhelmed by "a horrible thought" about Hyŏngsik and Yŏngch'ae, she found herself with demons in her imagination of a dark hell. Christian teachings of love and self-control in the Bible appear to have made a backdrop for the imaginary of hell. But, as we can see above, Sŏnhyŏng's imagination of hell, associated with her experience of having evil feelings in terms of Christian morality, does not make her faith in God stronger. Yi makes roughly the picture of hell in her imagination merely figuratively as traditionally conceived in the Korean society of his time in that the sufferings of sinners in hell were simplified with the horrors of demons. And, in this picture, although all the men in the train car would be assumed to be demons, none of them should be assumed to portray the sinners in hell.

Yi's last hybrid portrayal of hell renders Sŏnhyŏng's experience of "jealousy" to disclose the limits of Christian teachings of moral virtue and thereby reveal that the Christian theodicy of hell is not so very different from Confucian ethics if it does not help us find the real "person" within us. As said earlier, he appreciated Christianity's contribution to the modernization of the Korean society of his time, yet he cannot embrace the eschatological longings for salvation in Christianity in which self should be negated and thereby replaced with God's will. This can be exemplified by Hyŏngsik's narration of Jesus Christ as nothing but a "person" in his first awakening of himself (Yi 2023, p. 104). And Hyŏngsik's second awakening of his inner self offers another adequate illustration of Yi's critical appropriation of Christianity. Yi makes his readers behold that Hyŏngsik found his inner self when he realized that he could be suddenly retrieved by a flash of joy with Sŏnhyŏng from his despair driven by the failure to redeem Yŏngch'ae because of his lack of money (Yi 2023, pp. 110–14). If Yi is to persuade his readers that the self-awakening of the inner self is desirable, he must overcome the understandings of human virtues, in relationship with God or with neighboring others, decisively shaped by the Confucian ethics of his time and the Christian theodicy of hell.

4. New Subjectivity Beyond Christianity

Yi's search for the "inner self" in *The Heartless*, which is bound up with his advocacy of the liberation of emotions from social norms and ethical duties, cannot be identified simply with the espousal of modern individuality through rationality. As Yoon Sun Yang points out (Yang 2017, pp. 5–6), *The Heartless* does not elucidate the emergence of the "European proto-types of the individual" but variegated appropriations of diverse conceptions of subjectivity. In *The Heartless*, Yi's emphasis on emotions with respect to the self-awakening of the inner self places the vitality of self-discovery not in solitary individuality but in relationships with others, specifically relationships that provoke lustful love and coveting jealousy. Admittedly, the hybrid religiosity of hell in *The Heartless* is not an indication of the continuation of the backward past. But it shows that for him, both Confucianism and Christianity brought into being the specters of the backward ideals of "virtuous" conformity with which Koreans had been acculturated into absurd or pretentious innocence. By the same token, the imaginaries of hell in *The Heartless* reflect Yi's convoluted attitudes toward Christianity. He discerned that despite the significant roles of Christianity in modernizing the Korean society of his time, not only the Christian church in conjunction with Confucian ways of life but Christian moral teachings associated with self-negation and self-control were very often the sources of serious and painful impediments in the search for the inner self.

Such an effort to search for a new individuality as opposed to the Confucian ideal of virtuous conformity in Northeast Asia can be found in Lu Xun (1881–1936)'s works. When he elaborates on the prose romances of the Tang Dynasty, he laments that "we might know of the shortcomings of actual life, but we are unwilling to admit them" (Lu 2005d, p. 326). At the same time, he contends that because of the national character for maintaining "family-hood" (*tuanyuan*, 团圆) with neighboring others or harmonious "togetherness" without trouble, the Chinese people of his time held stubbornly to a "deceived" innocence. For him, all the sociopolitical problems of his time could be attributed to this tendency to live with a deceptive daydream of "reunion" without confronting the problems of actual life. And, in his bold criticism of the "deceived" innocence that was anchored in the deep psyche of the Chinese people of his time, he maintains that the Confucian moral virtue of "harmony" (*he*, 和) together with Daoist–Buddhist conceptions of "the Way" (*dao*, 道) had played a significant role in shaping the moribund nature of the Chinese society of his time through the idiosyncratic idealities of absurd conformity. As Davies points out (Davies 2013, pp. 22–65), he openly disparaged the Confucian–Daoist–Buddhist tutelage of moral virtue as self-deceiving pretentions that were dragging China into misery and unbearable justifications of what amounted to the fatal injustices that had befallen the Chinese people of his time.

However, in Lu Xun's portrayals of hell, we see that he failed to find a panacea for his new individuality even in an alien modernity. This is particularly evident in *New Year's Sacrifice* (1924) where Lu Xun likens himself to the I-narrator who cannot find his place not only in his hometown where he does not have his own home but in other places in which he has travelled around and obtained new knowledge. The I-narrator's answer to Xiang Lin's wife's question of whether there is an immortal soul after death does not disclose the superficiality of his knowledge about things other than what he had learned in his hometown. But Xiang Lin's wife's second question of whether there would be a hell evinced that he was completely ignorant (Lu 2005e, p. 7). This awakening of the I-narrator's ignorance about the existence of hell switched him from a bystander to an observer who closely scrutinized cultural secrets behind the New Year rituals of Lu Town. But this awakening was not enough to embark on another journey to finding a new subjectivity. At a glance, Lu Xun appears to render the I-narrator distinguishable from Lu Town's intolera-

ble townsmen, who were aesthetically satisfied with the torments of Xiang Li's wife. Obviously, Lu Xun's derogatory descriptions of Confucian–Daoist–Buddhist behaviors in Lu Town resonate with what he condemned the Chinese backward cultures of his time with the metaphor of "man-eating" in "The Diary of a Madman" (Gao 1989). But, when the I-narrator felt released from worries about Xiang Li's death by the New Year rituals in Lu Town (Lu 2005e, p. 21), we come to see that the I-narrator stood at a crossroads between hometown and an alien modernity. For Lu Xun, the I-narrator's new culture cannot be better than Lu Town's backward cultures.

In *Wild Grass* (1927), Lu Xun's alterity of modernity is juxtaposed with his consideration of Christianity. We can hardly deny that Christianity played a crucial role in shaping Lu Xun's critical stance toward traditional Chinese values (Zhang 1995). But, in *Wild Grass*, Lu Xun's seriously spiritual description of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ in "Revenge II" (1924) is followed by another secular and nihilistic description of hell in "The Good Hell That Was Lost" (1925). Thus, if we draw our attention only to Lu Xun's Christian religiosity in these two poems, there are irreconcilable discrepancies between them. Even if we consider the fact that the armed conflicts between warlords after the Xinhai Revolution gave Lu Xun a leitmotif to write the latter, the audaciously nihilistic and secular portrayal of hell in the latter cannot be domesticated by the emphatically Christian religiosity of the former. Yet, a presiding thesis of Lu Xun in these two poems is that though we can know that God exits, we cannot know what God is and thereby there would be no divine justice in the world as well as in hell. At this juncture, Lu Xun's view of "man" (*ren*, 人) integrates these two different yet mutually unexclusive religiosities into the alterity of modernity in his search for new subjectivity. Here is an example:

> God had forsaken him, and so he had eventually become the son of man. But the Israelites crucified even the son of man.
>
> On the bodies of those who crucified the son of man, there were bloodstains and the stink of gore far worse than when the Son of God was crucified. (Lu 2005a, p. 179; *our translation*)

As we can see above, Lu Xun does not consider the question of whether Jesus Christ was the son of man or the Son of God. For him, even if we recognize that he was the Son of God, there would be nothing to be different from the ways in which men live after the death of Jesus. Interestingly, Lu Xun does not take the most humane portrayal of the crucifixion in Luke where we can see that Jesus asked God to forgive "men" (Luke 23:34). Lu Xun's portrayal of the crucifixion is focused more on the radically alternated condition of "men" after the death of the Son of God. More specifically, in his vision of the world after the death of Jesus, the conditions of men's everyday life became worse than before. At this juncture, Lu Xun implies that it is not because men crucified the Son of God but because the world of men itself was bloody and crueler than the world of men with God. The same move is made in "The Good Hell That Was Lost."

> The mandala flowers withered immediately. The oils were boiling as they used to be, the blades were sharp as they used to be, and the flames were fierce as they used to be. The ghosts were groaning all together, and they were all struggling with one another, thus they had no chance to come up with the good hell they had lost. (Lu 2005b, p. 205; *our translation*).[6]

Lu Xun's portrayal of hell above indicates the sufferings of the ghosts (*guizhong*, 鬼众) under men's rein in hell. Concomitantly, it signifies the devil's reign as the good hell that was lost. Regardless of the metaphorical identity of the men in the poem, we need to pay attention to the narration that men's reign in hell had recuperated the order of hell. Accordingly, men would not have usurped the devil's throne in hell had the ghosts that were

enlightened by the devil not craved to gain more by destroying hell. Men fought together with the ghosts against the devil, but men suddenly turned against the ghosts after the defeat of the devil and then dominated them in hell. For Lu Xun, as he said that "thus no matter who wins, hell is still hell" (Lu 2005c, p. 77), the way in which men seized the helm of power in hell by ensnaring the ghosts is not so very important. What we can see from Lu Xun's view of men is that with the recuperation of hell through men's reign, he recounts the genesis of hell. Hell is hell not by virtue of what God or a divine being manifestly created, but by what men wish to have. Nevertheless, men's reign in hell cannot be possible if the order of hell was created by God or a divine being in the first place.

In comparison with Lu Xun's secular yet sympathetic relocation of Christian spirituality within the traditional Chinese imaginaries of hell, Yi Kwangsu's hybrid religiosity of hell takes a less pessimistic stance about human possibility. He does not hesitate to call Jesus Christ a man (Yi 2023, pp. 104–5), and his identification of Jesus with a man transposes a set of human desires and passions to tackle the religious or ethical tutelage of moral virtue regardless of Christian or Confucian traditions. Whatever the obstructions of those normative ethics to his way of finding a new subjectivity, he sought to distance himself from them the predominant teachings of which end up with self-negation or self-control. For Yi, these ethical teachings were simply a wrong guiding principle that had reinforced the backward ideals of conformity. He rather found a new subjectivity in the principle of the "willful individual" or "human capacity", which were associated with his later advocacy of "spiritual civilization" (Kwak 2008). In contrast, Lu Xun was more pessimistic about the prospects of positive change by enlightening human capacity in the Chinese society of his time. This pessimistic view of human possibility was interwoven with his precarious embrace of Christian religiosity in which men without God repay evil with evil. For him, the new emerging evils of the Chinese society of his time were nothing better than those of the old society. Thus, he stood at a crossroads between ancient and modern. In contrast, Yi began to find a shelter for a new subjectivity beyond the absurd innocence of the backward past and the idiosyncratic alterity of modernity.

5. Conclusions

Yi Kwangsu's hybrid religiosity of hell reflects an alterity of Christian religiosity in the way of searching for a new subjectivity in colonial modernity. As we have shown so far, despite his acknowledgment of Christianity as the modernizing motor of the Korean society of his time, he held a convoluted but negative stance toward not only the Christian church reinforcing the Confucian hierarchical ways of living but the Christian religiosity of hell through which men could be shaped through another subjectivity into conformity. As the first portrayal of hell in *The Heartless* indicates, Sŏnhyŏng's absurd innocence concerning the evils of doing what the Christian God had forbidden or prohibited was as harmful as the traditional Confucian norms for awakening the "person" (*soksaram*) within herself. Likewise, Yŏngch'ae's pretentious innocence in the second portrayal of hell in *The Heartless* signifies an unavoidable consequence of the Confucian ideals of the virtuous person through conformity. The hybrid religiosity of hell in Yi's descriptions stresses the need for liberating oneself from the Confucian tutelage of becoming a "virtuous" person by becoming a "willful" person. Ultimately, in the last portrayal of hell in *The Heartless*, Yi dislocates Christianity from the self-awakening of modern subjectivity. At this juncture, the Christian view of individuality, the religious and ethical implications of which necessarily require self-negation and self-moderation, is disenfranchised from his search for a new individuality. For Yi, what was required for men in colonial modernity was another alterity, the possible shelter of which could be found beyond the backward past and the new learnings from the West.

Lu Xun, who had become increasingly pessimistic about human capacity since the Xinhai revolution, stood across the backward past and the new learnings from the West. As we have shown with his portrayals of hell, for him, the evils of enlightened men in his time were as cruel as those of the backward past with a "deceived" innocence. At this juncture, we argued that his secular yet sympathetic descriptions of the death of Jesus anticipated his pessimistic view of men in "The Good Hell That Was Lost." Just like the I-narrator in *New Year's Sacrifice*, he tries to find a shelter to be liberated both from what he saw as the Chinese habituated tendencies of deceived innocence as well as from what he found as the innate evils within men. On the contrary, Yi could not stand across between the backward past of Confucian practices and the new learnings from the West. As we have shown, his vision of willful subjectivity in *The Heartless* embraces neither the Confucian tutelages of morality nor Christian teachings about human evilness. More specifically speaking, he found faults with the interplay of the Confucian legacy of self-cultivation with the Christian eschatological longing for personal salvation. For him, the backwardness of hierarchical spirituality in Confucian ritual practices in the past was realigned with the spiritual longing of Christians for salvation from men's ontological vulnerabilities and begot the ideals of conformity through which Koreans of his time were habituated to living with "absurd" or "pretentious" innocence. Thus, different from Lu Xun's despairing account of human possibility, Yi's search for a new subjectivity was firmly anchored in the radicalization of the human will, which should be apart from God's grace.

All in all, the Christian imaginaries of hell or evils that were localized in the diverse Northeast Asian trajectories of early modernity were not necessarily associated with the problem of hell, which pertains to the question of why an omnipotent God allows evil to exist eternally. Needless to say, the demarcation of God's omnipotent sovereignty from the problem of hell in Northeast Asian contexts was shaped through the traditional religiosities of hell in Northeast Asian cultures. However, as we have seen from Yi Kwangsu's hybrid religiosity of hell in his first modern novel, the Christian imaginary of hell was dislocated and finally disenfranchised in his search for a new subjectivity. Furthermore, as we can see from the comparison of Yi Kwangsu with Lu Xun in terms of their different alterities of modernity, we can hardly simplify their searches for the modern self with the simple dichotomy between the backward past and the new learnings of the West or with the Weberian distinction between individuality in Western cultures and collectivity in non-Western cultures. These culturally biased frameworks prevent us from acknowledging the variegated ways of finding new subjectivity in Northeast Asian trajectories of modernity. Faced with the problems pertaining to the backward past, they searched for a new subjectivity with what they learned from Christianity. But, concomitantly, they did not fully validate the Christian theodicy of hell that questioned the tension between eternal punishment and the goodness of God. Lu Xun was relatively more sympathetic to Christianity than Yi Kwangsu. Yi, who had shelter neither in the past nor in colonial modernity, rejected Christianity, the interplay of which with Confucian teachings of self-control and self-negation annihilated the possibility of finding another shelter with willful subjectivity.

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Notes

[1] Interestingly, all of these Northeast Asian modern writers explored the nature of evil or that of hell in their pursuit of a new subjectivity. As we shall elaborate in this article, Yi Kwangsu's hybrid religiosity of hell in *The Heartless* (1917) dislocates Christianity from his longing for willful subjectivity, while Lu Xun's imaginaries of hell in "The Good Hell That Was Lost" (1925) indicate his sympathetic relocation of Christian spirituality into his pessimistic view of human possibility. Natsume Soseki also presents the nature of evil through the existential sense of man's "loneliness" in *The Heart* (1914), where his exploration of individuality is intertwined with his encounter with Western individualism. The comparison of these writers in this regard may be an imperative task. But it is far beyond the scope of this article. Thus, we are focused on Yi Kwangsu and Lu Xun, particularly with respect to their convoluted attitudes toward Christianity.

[2] The descriptions of hell in *The Heartless* certainly resonate with what Reinhart Koselleck conceptualized as a radical break in the relationship between the "space of experience" (*Erfahrungsraum*) and the "horizon of expectation" (*Erwartungshorizont*), whereby expectations about the future become detached from visions shaped by traditional experiences (Koselleck 2004, pp. 263–75).

[3] In this context, we call Yi Kwangsu's new subjectivity that of the "willful individual". As we shall show in Section 4, for Yi Kwangsu the willful individual is able to set ends for herself, having the capacity to choose her most central life plans while overcoming the obstacles that stand in the way of achieving those ends. More specifically, there are two main aspects to the willful individual: First, the capacity of the willful individual is not opposed to being determined by desires and passions. It rather requires the self-awakening of her desires and passions. Second, this willful subjectivity does retain the capacity of its will uninterrupted and uninfluenced by herd morality or common religiosity. As we shall see, in Yi Kwangsu's vision of willful subjectivity, men should be liberated both from the Confucian tutelage of morality and Christian teachings about human evil. Regarding Yi Kwangsu's Nietzschean view of passions and desires, see Kwak (2008).

[4] The imaginary of hell in *The Heartless* was intertwined with the Buddhist dichotomy of heaven and hell. The Buddhist imaginary of hell in the Joseon (Chosŏn) society of Yi's time retained a hybrid religiosity in which Confucianism and Daoism were amalgamated with variegated warnings about hell. Essentially, Confucianism and Daoism do not consider the existence of an afterlife. However, in the Buddhist imaginary of hell in Korean society, the feelings of grief, loss, and mourning over human mortality and moral impropriety in relationships with neighboring others were sophisticatedly intermingled with the traditional depictions of the punishment of the "ten kings" in hell. Similar combinations of the Daoist conception of "living well and dying well" with the Buddhist imaginary of hell can be found in Yi's portrayals of hell. See Park (1997), (T. Kim 2009; K.-j. Kim 2017).

[5] All references to Yi Kwangsu's *The Heartless* will be these two texts. For quoting the original text in Korean, we will use (Yi 2023). And we will use the translation of *Mujŏng* in English by Ann Sung-Hi Lee, (Yi 2005).

[6] In Lu Xun's portrayals of hell in the poem, the cultural backdrops of which are chiefly associated with the Shamanist cosmology of three realms (Heaven, Earth, and the Underworld) and the Buddhist scheme of punishment in hell, there have been three reigns: Heavenly God (*tianshen*, 天神)'s reign, the devil (*mogui*, 魔鬼)'s reign, and men (*reinei*, 人类)'s reign. According to the devil's narration, the devil usurped Heavenly God's thrown in hell, but its reign was taken over by men. The most imperative debate regarding this poem is about the identity of the devil, in conjunction with Lu Xun's mention about hell with respect to the armed battles between warlords after Xinhai revolution in "Zayu". Certainly, we can hardly deny that the identity of the devil is imperative for us to read the poem. But it is not appropriate to simplify it with particular historical agents such as warlords after Xinhai revolution. In this article, we focus more on Lu Xun's view of "man" rather than the identities of Heavenly God, the devil, and men. Regarding the debates on the identity of the devil, see Zhou (2022). And regarding the recent criticism of historical approaches to the poem, which interprets the poem as Lu Xun's return to the rigor of Xinhai revolution from May 4th revolution, see Liu (2019).

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