

Book Review

Everything Yearned For: Manhae's Poems of Love and Longing

Translated and introduced
by Francisca Cho
Wisdom Publications, 2005
Review by Judy Roitman JDPSN

*My love, take my life, a small bird in an
endless desert
without a single tree to perch upon, and
hold it tight.
And then lift each crushed fragment of
life to your lips.*

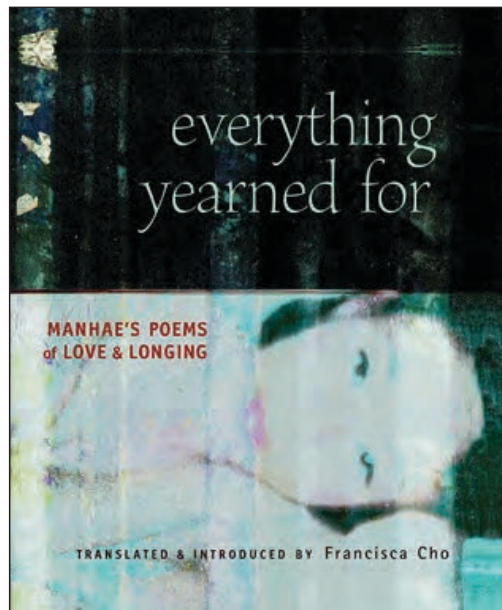
This is a book of love poems, some in a woman's voice, some in a man's, originally published in 1926, written by a famous Korean Buddhist monk. Clearly, there's a backstory here.

Manhae was born in 1879 and became a monk in the Chogye order when he was 18. Today he is best known for his tireless work against the Japanese occupation—"the patriot monk!" a Korean member of our sangha exclaimed delightedly when she heard I was writing this review—and for his attempts to reform the Korean Buddhism of his time. There is a Society for the Promotion and Practice of Manhae's Thoughts, a Manhae Foundation, and a Manhae Prize. And, while this book was not widely read when first published, for decades every Korean schoolchild has read at least some of these poems.

"Mind and matter cannot be independent of each other," Manhae wrote in *My Buddhist Beliefs*, and his extensive Buddhist writings developed this theme in many contexts, from abstract and theoretical to highly practical; he is considered a precursor of engaged Buddhism, and even explored a notion of Buddhist socialism. He argued against celibacy for monks (he himself married in 1933, seven years after his Chogye order allowed it), feeling it cut them off from the broader sangha and limited their spiritual development. He died in 1944, and both the (again celibate) Chogye order and the (non-celibate) Taego order claim him as their own.

The poems in *Everything Yearned For* are saturated with longing, claustrophobic in their obsession. But who is the beloved? A standard Korean interpretation (and one reason for their modern popularity) is that the beloved in these poems is the nation of Korea. Another interpretation is that the beloved is Buddhist enlightenment. But the translator urges us to read each poem without preconceptions. Yes, in some of them the beloved is Korea, and yes, Buddhism permeates many of them, but forcing either frame on these poems distorts them just as surely as the many blurbs forcing them into the standard frame of mystical love poems, which seek to unite with God. (With what God would a Buddhist monk unite?)

In some sense Manhae does *not* wish to be united with the beloved; love is deepest when the beloved is absent. It is absence that



creates the remarkable intensity of these poems, and in one of them he explicitly argues with Rabindranath Tagore (regarded as a hero throughout Asia because of his 1913 Nobel Prize) on this point, even though his poetic form of long and winding lines is deeply influenced by Tagore. To Manhae, consummation (*samadhi*) is not the end; it is the beginning. How do you function?

Manhae's poetic form was revolutionary. Until after the First World War, Korean poetry was either written in Chinese (Manhae himself wrote more than 150 poems in Chinese) or constrained by strict song forms (think of English ballads, or classic blues). But despite the formal innovation, these poems are saturated in classical imagery, and their historical references are several hundred years old. Even gender-bending is part of the classic tradition: poets often spoke

of exile in the voice of an abandoned wife, and some of these poems are modeled on those of medieval Korean courtesans. We are steeped in a world that reaches back to the Tang dynasty, with no trains, guns or automobiles; no movies, telephones or even telegraphs.

Korean is a very different language from English, and Francisca Cho, a Korean-American scholar of Buddhism, has had to grapple with some difficult issues. The first is that indications of gender may be too subtle to survive translation. I was only able to identify the gender of the speaker in about a quarter of these poems; in Korean almost all would be identified easily. On the other hand, this gives a wonderful ambiguity to most of the poems—longing is longing, no matter who the speaker is.

There is the matter of pronouns. In Korean many of these pronouns would be implicit, unstated. But they can't be left out in English. So these poems bristle with "I" and "you," which can't be helped, but changes the poems greatly.

There is the title. The Korean title half-translated is "the silence of *nim*." What is this *nim*? We are familiar with it as an honorific—*soen sa nim*, *poep sa nim*. But it turns out to be much more: *beloved*, *honored*, or, as Cho writes, "anyone or anything that is held in loving esteem." Thus Cho uses *The Silence of Everything Yearned For* as the title of the book (the publisher uses a different title), and in her translations of the poems she often leaves the word *nim* untranslated. That is a wonderful solution to a difficult problem: *nim* begins to gain the penumbra of associations it has in Korean, rather than being restricted by English approximations.

An important aspect of this book is Cho's commentary, in the translator's preface, and in several chapters of notes after the poems, giving a clear picture of the complex political, religious and poetic context in which Manhae lived and wrote these poems.

Note: I would like to thank So-young Kim for her helpful comments on the Korean language. ♦