Historical Fiction on event in Korean history

By Vicky Wang

Mansei

Seoul, February 1919. The winter wind carries duct and whispers through Jongno's narrow streets. Posters of the Japanese Emperor on stone walls, their paper edges curling and half-torn by the cold. Beneath them, students move like shadows, passing folded letters and glancing over their shoulders. In one of the side alleys, Ji-yeon presses as sheet of paper to her chest before slipping it into her satchel. Her fingers tremble, not from cold but from the pulse of something greater than fear.

She walks quickly toward the small church where Father Han holds evening prayers. Inside, candles burn low, and the air is thick with incense and apprehension. Her brother, Seung-ho, leans against a wooden pew, his hands rough from factory work, faintly smelling of iron and oil.

"Another meeting?" he asks, his voice low and wary of police informers who might be listening, even inside the house of God.

Ji-yeon nods. "It's not just talk anymore. They've written the Declaration, and it will be read at Pagoda Park next week."

He stares at her, his jaw tight. "You'll get yourself arrested---or worse."

She lifts her chin. No one stand; we will remain bowed forever.

Father Han steps forward from the pulpit, his Bible in in one hand. “Enough,” he says gently. “This is not a time for quarrels. It is a time for prayer and wisdom.” Yet his eyes flicker with the same tension—faith against fear, duty against silence.

After the service, when the others have left, Ji-yeon lingers by the door. “Father,” she asks quietly, “Do you think God hears the cries of a nation?”

He exhales slowly. “He hears everything, but he also wants to see who among us will speak first.”

Days pass. Rumors spread faster than the wind—Japan’s Emperor has died, and whispers of U.S. President Wilson’s *Fourteen Point* stir impossible dreams. Newspapers mention “self-determination.” In teahouses, workers huddle around radio reports from Paris, wondering if the world beyond the sea might finally listen to their small, occupied country.

In the girls’ dormitory, Ji-yeon’s classmates sew hidden flags from white linen. One hums a forbidden song, its melody trembling like a heartbeat. Outside, snow begins to melt, dripping from eaves and rooftops—a slow thaw that feels like world’s breath returning.

Ji-yeon spends her nights copying the Declaration by hand. Each sentence feels

sacred: *claim to independence in the name of truth, justice, and humanity*. Her calligraphy is careful and reverent. She imagines standing before a crowd, her voice trembling but clear. She envisions a free Korea—schools without Japanese flags, sermons without censorship, and her brother smiling without fear.

Seung-ho watches her from the doorway, the smell of machine oil still clinging to his clothes. “Words cannot stop billets,” he mutters.

“Maybe not,” she says softly, “but they can start something that doesn’t die.”

He wants to argue, but something in her eyes—a kind of light he has never seen before—stops him.

Lieutenant Sato walks the same streets at dawn, the sound of his boots echoing through empty courtyards. His orders are clear: maintain peace and suppress gatherings. Yet his mind drifts to Tokyo and the ideals of civilization that Japan claims to bring to its colonies. He recalls his training—the speeches about loyalty and harmony, about Asia’s “destiny under one flag.” But each time he sees the frightened faces of Korean shopkeepers bowing too quickly, he feels a hollow emptiness open inside him.

At a printing shop rumored to distribute seditious leaflets, he finds nothing but ink-stained paper and silence. The owner’s hands tremble as he offers tea. Sato declines.

“Do you believe in independence?” he asks, even though he is not supposed to.

The man hesitates. “I believe in dignity.”

Sato leaves without arresting him, even though he knows he should. The smell of ink and fear lingers long after he steps outside.

That night, Sato writes to his brother in Tokyo: *They do not seem like enemies. Only people who wish to breathe*. He does not post the letter.

March 1st, 1919

(JYJ, 2019)

Pagoda Park fills with people before noon. The sky is pale, and the air is sharp with anticipation. Students, merchants, women in white hanbok, and old men leaning on canes—all waits. Ji-yeon stands near the front, gripping Seung-ho’s hand. Her satchel

feels lighter now; the declaration is gone, passed through countless hands like a fragile secret.

When the words finally ring out— *"Korea is an independent nation…"* –the world seems to stand still. For a heartbeat, silence hangs heavy, and then it breaks: *"Mansei! Mansei!"* The cry rises like thunder, rolling through the city. Flags wave—white cloths emblazoned with the red and blue taegeuk—and for a moment, the air feels sacred.

The ground trembles beneath thousands of feet. Vendors abandon their stalls to join the chant. A boy climbs onto a statue and waves a flag, his voice cracking with joy. Ji-yeon feels tears sting her eyes as she shouts until her throat burns.

Seung-ho's heart hammers. He never intended to come, but the sound of that cry—his sister's voice among thousands—pulls him into the current. He sees old women throwing flowers, schoolchildren clapping, and monks chanting prayers. Hope flows through the crowd like light.

From across the square, Lieutenant Sato tightens his grip on his baton. The orders come in curt Japanese: disperse the crowd. But the faces before him are not those of a mob: they are people singing. The first strike of a rifle butt against bone sounds like thunder.

Chaos erupts. Ji-yeon sees an old woman fall and rushes to help, only to feel a hand wrench her backward. Seung-ho throws himself forward, shouting her name, but the soldiers close in.

Sato’s eyes meet Ji-yeon’s for a moment—his expression unreadable, caught between command and conscience. Then, the orders take over. The sounds of boots, screams, and shattering banners fill the air.

By dusk, Pagoda Park becomes a wasteland strewn with trampled flags and bloodstained snow.

(Kim, 2023)

Night falls. Seoul burns quietly under curfew. Father Han walks through alleys lit by

oil lamps, searching for his congregation. The air smells of smoke and blood. He finds the church door splintered. Inside, the cross still hangs—crooked but unbroken.

He kneels and whispers a prayer—not for peace, but for courage. Outside, soldiers drag bodies toward carts. The city is silent, but beneath that silence lies something fierce: a pulse that refuses to die.

At the police station, Ji-yeon sits on the cold floor of a cell. Her face is bruised, and her lip split, but her eyes remain bright. Across from her, Seung-ho lies motionless, his shoulder bandaged with a strip torn from a sleeve.

“You shouldn’t have come,” she whispered.

He opens his eyes, had to protect you.

“Then protect what I believe in,” she says. “Promise me you won’t give up.”

He looks at her—the sister who once recited poetry beneath cherry blossoms, now speaking through cracked lips—and nods. “if they take you, I’ll still carry your voice.”

Outside, Sato watches through the bars, cigarette smoke curling upward. His superior has commended his efficiency, yet something inside him aches. He thinks of his mother’s letters, recalling how she wrote, “Do what brings honor.” For the first time, he wonders what that truly means.

Later, alone in his office, he opens the confiscated Declaration and reads it again. The language surprises him—there is no hatred, no vengeance. Only sorrow and resolve are not enemies of Japan. We only wish to live as free human beings. He folds it carefully, unable to throw it way.

Weeks pass. Trials are swift. Prisons overflow. Ji-yeon's cellmates whisper news—protests spreading across the peninsula, even reaching Pyongyang, Jeonju, and Mokpo. Thousands are arrested, hundreds killed. And yet, every whisper ends the same way: *Mansei*.

One night, Ji-yeon wakes to the sound of footsteps. A young nurse slips into the cell carrying a basin of water. "They say America might intervene," she whispers. "People in Shanghai are printing your names."

Ji-yeon dips her bruised hands into the water. "Then we have already won something."

Father Han is summoned by the police. Sato questions him formally, maintaining a professional tone.

"You are accused of encouraging sedition," Sato says.

"I encouraged faith," Father Han replies

"In what? In rebellion?"

“In human dignity.”

Sato’s pen hesitates. “You know,” he says quietly, “faith doesn’t stop bullets either.”

“Neither does obedience,” the pastor replies.

That night, Sato dreams of fire—crowds running, his own hands bloodied. He wakes before dawn, removes his cap, and looks toward the horizon where the city stirs. He no longer knows which side of history he stands on.

Spring arrives. Cherry blossoms bloom over the graves of the nameless. Ji-yeon is transferred to a rural prison. From her window, she sees the mountains faintly pink—the color of life returning. She hears rumors that the world has hears: The New York Times, American missionaries, whispers of Korean suffering reaching across oceans. Perhaps the world’s silence will not last forever.

She writes a note on a scrap of paper, which she smuggles through a sympathetic guard:

To my bother: I am not afraid. The world is larger than these walls. If you can hear me, remember that even silence can carry the sound of freedom.

Each night, she whispers *Mansei* before sleep—not as a shout, but as a prayer.

Seung-ho returns to the factory, limping. The machines groan as before, but

something has changed among the workers. They hum the rhythm of protest songs under their breath and pass secret pamphlets during their shifts. Hope spreads like an ember that refuses to die.

At night, he visits the church. Father Han preaches under the watchful eyes of colonial officer. “The seed must fall before it grows,” he says. His voice trembles but does not break.

Sato sits in the last pew, off duty. He listens with his hands clasped, his uniform collar undone. The words pierce a hollow place inside him. When the service ends, he quietly walks out into the rain. He does not return to the station that night.

Months later, Ji-yeon is released. Her body is thin, and her steps are slow, but as she walks through Jongno again, she sees color—the market stalls, the flags hidden behind shutters, and the faint smile of a stranger who whispers, “You were there, weren’t you?”

She nods.

The same posters of the emperor still hang on the walls, but beside one, someone has written in charcoal: The letters are small but resolute.

Ji-yeon gently touches the word. She looks up at the sky—the same sky that witnessed their rise and fall—and smiles.

"It isn't over," she whispers.

And, for the first time, the wind seems to respond.

Reflection

Writing *Mansei* allowed me to translate a major historical event—the March 1st Movement—into a personal, human story. My goal was to convey the emotional depth of colonial resistance while preserving historical accuracy. I was especially influenced by my tutor's feedback to explore moral complexity, concentrate on a limited setting, and incorporate an international context.

To maintain unity of space, I confined the story to several recurring location: Father Han's church, Pagoda Park, the police cell, and the streets of Seoul. These setting serve as reflections of emotional states—the church representing moral struggle, the park symbolizing hope, and the cell embodying endurance. This approach created coherence without restricting the story's scope.

Incorporating an international context was crucial. The reference to Woodrow Wilson's *Fourteen Points* reflects the optimism that inspired many Koreans in 1919, as they believed the postwar world might support self-determination. Yet, this hope contrasts tragically with the brutal colonial response, highlighting the stark gulf between global rhetoric and lived experience.

The characters were crafted to embody conflicting moral positions rather than simple binaries. Ji-yeon represents idealism and youth; Seung-ho symbolizes fear transformed into reluctant courage; Father Han embodies faith caught between duty and danger; and Sato personifies the internal conflict of colonial agents—aware of injustice yet complicit. By avoiding absolute villains or heroes, I aimed to highlight how oppression and conscience coexist within the same historical moment.

Stylistically, I shifted from a script format to narrative prose to enhance introspection and atmosphere. Using the present tense creates immediacy, allowing readers to experience the urgency of 1919 firsthand rather than observing it from a distance. Dialogue was limited to key emotional moments so that the narration could more fully convey mood and moral tension.

Balancing fact and fiction require careful attention. While the main characters are fictional, every reference to the March 1st demonstrations, slogans, arrests, and the Declaration of Independence reflects documented history. The story draw from Michael Robinson's *Cultural Nationalism in Colonial Korea* and Andre Schmid's *Korea Between Empires*, which illuminate how the movement united people across class and ideology.

Ultimately, *Mansei* is a story about endurance. Although the uprising failed to achieve its immediate goals, its moral force persisted. By concluding with Ji-yeon's quiet

hope, I aimed to reflect the spirit of a people who, even in defeat, found their collective voice.

Reference:

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