

Tasks Left By a Borderer of Her Time: Alice Hyun and Her Days, by Jung Byung-Joon

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When looking at Korea's modern and contemporary history, one frequently has to come face to face with the turmoils of a particular era. Permeating through these turmoils are bound to be the pain suffered by individuals and society, leaving us to ponder what tasks they may have left us. One example that tells us what tasks have been left by the history of a particular era is the book, *Alice Hyun and Her Days*.

Alice Hyun (Korean name: Hyun Mi-Ok) was not a figure well known in Korean society until quite recently. She was neither a person with achievements well-known enough for her name to become widely famous, nor one on whom much material and documents could be found in relation to her life. What very little is known about her comes from trial documents related to North Korea's purge of Pak Hŏn-Yŏng, referred to as 'Pak Hŏn-Yŏng Trial Documents', or officially, 'Documents from the Trial on the Conspiracy to Subvert the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and Espionage Activities of the Group Led by Pak Hŏn-Yŏng and Lee Sŭng-Yŏp, Spies Recruited by US Imperialism', and also from descriptions about her in some South and North Korean documents and testimonies. These documents portray Alice Hyun as once a lover of Pak Hŏn-Yŏng and an American spy. Many referred to her as the Korean version of

Mata Hari.

However, the author of this book raises a question about what people know about her. Was she really an American spy? According to the material the author, Jung Byung-Joon, came across, she was completely different from how she was known. So based on these material, he started to dig into her real life and eventually succeeded in revealing new truths about her life. According to the new interpretation of Alice Hyun, she was not an American spy. In fact, she was an incarnation of history and a borderer in the sense she had fully experienced, with all her body and mind, the turmoils of her era, which includes colonization, separation of family and division of the country. She was also a militant who fought to realize the ideals she dreamed of, going against the current of her times.

Alice Hyun was the daughter of Hyun Soon, an independence fighter and pastor. Alice, during Japanese colonial rule, had to live wandering from place to place around the world, during which her family became separated. She was born in Hawaii but her childhood in Seoul (then Kyōngsōng). Just before the March 1st Movement, Alice's father had to go to Shanghai on a mission for the independence movement, and Alice and her family soon followed. In Shanghai, Alice met many independence activists, including socialists such as Pak Hōn-Yōng. The book describes this era as one when imperialist powers turned their backs on smaller and weaker nations, which were, in turn, approached by USSR, a new socialist state reaching out its hand. It was also a time when many young passionate people were enthralled by the ideas of socialism. Alice Hyun was one of those influenced. Even after she came back to Hawaii, she continued to participate in activities related to the socialist movement, for example, by joining the Hawaiian branch of the Communist Party USA.

The liberation of her motherland was a significant turning point in Alice's life. Her life before liberation was one as a wonderer within a world of colonial rule and separation of her family whereas her life after liberation was one in which her fate was to become a militant living amidst turmoils of history marked by the division of the Peninsula and the Cold War. Having lived in various parts of the world, she was fluent in many languages, including English, Korean and Japanese, and thus was dispatched to Seoul as a civilian employee of the US

military. She must have had many different thoughts and feelings upon coming back to her motherland that had just been liberated. However, her stay in Seoul did not last long because of her activities. When she came back to Korea, she met Pak Hön-Yōng again, who at that time was the Secretary of the Communist Party of Korea. It seems that during the time she was working for the Civil Communication Intelligence Group of the US forces in Korea, she was also involved in activities related to the Communist Party of Korea and communists within the US military. She was later deported back to Hawaii, under suspicions that she was a communist.

After her return to the US, she moved from Hawaii to Los Angeles, and became an active member of a progressive Korean-American newspaper, *Independence*. At that time, *Independence* was considered radical even among the progressive circles, making it increasingly difficult for the members to survive within the Korean-American community and the US at large. The Cold War was indeed oppressive. In face of such difficulties, there were some within the *Independence* who wanted to go to North Korea. It seems that Alice Hyun was one of them. Although she had an important position in the newspaper, in March 1949, she left the US and travelled to Czech Republic, and then to North Korea a few months later.

In light of her life trajectory, one can indeed say that she was a borderer, living in an era that placed her at the forefront of colonial rule, division and the Cold War. At the same time, she was an activist. The book depicts her as energetically striving to realize her ideals and dreams. Her life before liberation, her energetic activities in South Korea after liberation, her role in the *Independence*, and the choice she made in order to venture into a world she dreamt of all show aspects of Alice Hyun as an activist who refused to conform to the society she lived in and instead continuously aspired to reach her dreams. However, the moment her ideals turned into reality, cruelty came upon her. During the process of Pak Hön-Yōng's purge in 1953, she was pinpointed as a spy for the Americans and had to face death. Alice, after having experienced separation of her family under colonialism and having fought against the tides of division and the Cold War, was unwelcome even in the place of her dreams, and had to remain a borderer of tragic

fate, an incarnation of the suffering caused by the history of her time. The author paints a comprehensive picture of her life trajectory and her activities in Seoul to convincingly show that there was not enough evidence to prove she was an American spy.

The book does not stop at merely revealing that she was not a spy. As described above, her life shows the complex intertwining of her as an intellectual with radical ideals under colonial rule, as a Korean diaspora embodying the adversities of history, and as an individual sacrificed by those greedy for power after division. The interesting part of this book is that it not only shows the trajectory of Alice Hyun's life but also comprehensively portrays the lives the people around her and also the trends of the times.

In the process of portraying Alice Hyun's life, the author also details the lives of the people around her. The book illustrates the characteristics of those who maintained the spirit of the March 1st Movement, the communists active in the US at that time and the lives of the progressive Korean diaspora including her own family. Major historical inflections such as colonization, separation of families, the Cold War and division, which Alice all went through, are seen through the lens of the lives of those who mainly lived in the periphery, rather than at the center of history. The book creates for the readers yet another image of history, which until now had been hidden behind the scars.

While reading the thick 400-page book, I also came across photos of Alice Hyun. The images of her in the photos seemed to change as she grew older. Upon reading the descriptions of her life and all the turmoil she had encountered, I was deluded that even the photos seemed indented. In a caption to a photo taken of her in Czech Republic, the author describes her as tired and annoyed but at the same time very determined (Jung Byung-Joon, p.264). It is an explanation that shows well her personal life as a borderer and the contrasting determination as an activist. I believe such a description resonates particularly well because the author, as I mentioned earlier, comprehensively depicts her life as well as the era she lived in.

I personally felt a lot of pain from the author's descriptions of Alice Hyun. It could be because I already knew that her tumultuous life would eventually end

tragically with the purge of Pak Hŏn-Yŏng, but also because of the feeling that there is still not enough space for her on this land. The Korean Peninsula still has not been able to heal all the historical suffering that came out of colonial rule and division, which Alice had gone through. Because of the immense loss that still has to be borne as a result of these circumstances, it is now up to us to try to come up with ways to heal the suffering endured by Alice and propose visions for a new future. This is the way to console the spirit of the woman who had vanished bearing all the pain caused by history. The book was a great benefit as it reminded me of this historical task.

Last but not least, I cannot help but share some thoughts on the book as a student studying modern history of North Korea. The facts newly revealed by the author taught me a lesson on the importance of comprehensively searching for relevant material. In fact, the life of Alice Hyun as portrayed in the book is not very clear. For some parts of her life, there was no material. However, it seems that the author was able to overcome the limitations of insufficient material by making a comprehensive search for reference. By exploring various material across the US, Czech Republic, Japan and Korea, the author was able to shed new light on Alice's life and the historical positioning of the era she had lived in, and thereby transformed the existing image of Alice Hyun.

Personally, while studying North Korean modern history, I sometimes get trapped inside the frame of the dogmatic explanations rendered by the North Korean government. This could be because I have no choice but to rely on official, publicly-disclosed documents when interpreting a particular historical event and its effects. Although I try to overcome the constraints posed by these types of documents by trying to focus on periodic differences of various material or by critically reading the material itself, the constraints are nonetheless there. Therefore, it was interesting for me to see the process of the author empirically revealing the limitations of the Pak Hŏn-Yŏng trial documents. I now look back and ask myself whether I had been negligent in trying to look for alternative documents, simply blaming the difficulties in finding necessary material. I was able to learn that richer interpretation of history has to be backed up by more strenuous effort.