CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION:
SOCIAL DARWINISM AND THE AMBIVALENCES OF MODERNITY

‘Cosmos is Might’: Social Darwinism as the Overarching Paradigm of Modern Korean Thought

In the December 1931 issue (No. 28) of the popular Korean journal, Tonggwang (The Eastern Light), a poem in prose appeared, the title and content of which represented to a great degree the zeitgeist of pre-colonial and early colonial modernity in Korea. The poem was entitled ‘The New Understanding of Might,’ and its lines read as follows:

The Cosmos is Might. All phenomena are the rhythm of the energy’s metamorphoses. There is no Cosmos without Might. Now, war clouds are hanging heavy over the continent of Asia. The attack is signalled, the storm is ordered, and the cannon smoke is rising. This is the expression of a nation’s might. The strengths of two nations collide.

There are no plainer representations of the form of Might than War. It is just like wind, water and lightning representing best the force of Nature.

War requires healthy physical, intellectual, and spiritual strength [...] War between two nations is, in the end, a comparison of the complex strengths of the two contestants.

But the problem is just that we do not possess this strength, the Might of body, brains, and spirit. That is why, on today’s scene where the whole of humanity is mobilized and has already gone into action, we cannot assume an [independent] role and just crouch behind the curtain, a bunch of people without even a family name! But once we acquire strength, humanity will politely send us an invitation to the scene.

Today is the day of the cultivation of strength!

This short poem, well-timed for the Manchurian Incident (September 18, 1931) and the start of a new round of Japanese aggression against China, is interesting not only for its dubious literary merits, but also because it was written by a highly symbolic figure in early modern Korean intellectual history. The author, Yi Kwangsu (1892–1950), was an acknowledged
literary prodigy and one of the most eminent ideologues of moderate cultural nationalism in colonial Korea. But, while the connection between the poem's blunt cul of Might and nationalist thought might seem quite possible to any commonsense view, other important features of the author's profile would definitely look highly incompatible with this paean to might and violence. Yi Kwangsu started his career as a devout Protestant Christian (he was converted in 1907, while studying in Tokyo) and Tolstoy's most influential follower in Korea, and later combined both Christianity and Buddhism to create a sort of synthetic religion built on universal ethical foundations. One of his most important novels is dedicated to Wŏnhyo (617–686), early Korea's best known Buddhist exegete and Pure Land devotee (Wŏnhyo Taesa, serialized in Maeil Sinbo between March 1 – October 31, 1942). Moreover, he continued to contribute his musings on Buddhist topics to the wartime newspapers from 1937–1945, and is known to have spent his last years—after the end of Japanese colonialism and before the Korean War—in the temple where his relative, Yi Haksu (1892–1980), a famous Buddhist scholar, was abbot. The natural question arises: How could religious devotion with explicit universal ethical overtones co-exist with such hymns to violence? Another

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5 Actually, the same unresolved contradiction between belief in religious altruism and recognition of the role and significance of ‘strength’ underlies the ideological construction of Yi Kwangsu’s earlier magnum opus, the ‘Treatise on National Reconstruction’ (Minjok