1. The Beginnings: reformation for the sake of survival, 1900s and early 1910s

The first part of Han Yongun’s life story can be regarded as a perfect illustration of both the deepening crisis in social and political life during the last decades of Korea’s Chosŏn Dynasty (1392–1910), and the deep ambiguities and uncertainties of the chaotic period of Korea’s transition to modernity. He was born as Han Yuch’ŏn (or Chŏngok) near the county seat of Hongsŏng,¹ in southern Ch’ungch’ŏng Province into a fallen yangban (noble) family of the Ch’ŏngju Han clan. They were proud descendants of a famed statesman of early Chosŏn, Han Myo’nghoe (1415–87), but possessed relatively little land by the end of the nineteenth century. Han Yongun could thus afford to study the Chinese classics from the tender age of five, but at the same time, he encountered many of the same burdens and dangers as his commoner friends. He was said to have been moved to tears when, as a nine-year-old, he read the thirteenth-century Chinese novel, The Romance of the Western Chamber (Xixiang ji), which concerns the obstacles a poor scholar encounters in love, and began thinking of the ephemeral nature of life.

As a teenager, Han Yuch’ŏn was also described as an unsurpassed muscular brave, famed for his physical strength already as a child.
and later renowned for successful fist fights with bandit gangs trying to prey upon his village (Kim Kwangsik 2004: 13–21; Yu Tonggon 1980: 16–21). If the accounts of his followers are to be believed, he retained his predilection for ‘righteous violence’ into his later years as well; he was reputed to have threatened one of colonial Korea’s richest men, Min Yonghui (1852–1935) with a fake pistol and violent language to force him to secretly finance the March 1st independence movement in 1919. In the mid-1930s, he is also said to have seriously injured an elder Confucian scholar, Chong Manjo (1858–1936) for what he believed were impudently pro-Japanese remarks in a public conversation, and to have used his fists on many other occasions, betraying the rough upbringing he received in his childhood (Kim Kwanho 1981: 281–313). Married in his early teens (as was customary at that time) and employed as a teacher of the Chinese classics in a local private Confucian primary school (sođang), Han Yuch’on suddenly left his native place for Seoul in 1897 and entered a Buddhist temple for the first time in his life. This move was due both to his fascination with Avatamsaka-sutra teachings (which he had discovered for himself at that time), and, very possibly, his unwillingness to follow in the footsteps of his father, a low-ranking local military commander who had recently been given orders to suppress the remnants of the anti-Japanese and anti-Western Tonghak (‘Eastern Learning’) rebels in the area (Han Yongun 1973, vol. 1: 253; Kim Kwangsik 2004: 22–25). When he returned after approximately three years, he was shocked to discover that the chaos of the late 1890s, when the Tonghak uprising was intermingled with the anti-governmental struggle of the conservative Neo-Confucian uibyŏng (‘Righteous Armies’) rebels, had left his father dead. With his family becoming increasingly impoverished, Hongson was no longer a peaceful abode for Han Yuch’on, and before long he was thrown unintentionally into the maelstrom of the political and ideological controversies of his time.

In 1903, fully aware of the fact that his wife was pregnant with his child, Han Yuch’on left his impecunious family, never to join it again, and headed first for a temple in the vicinity of his hometown (presumably Pŏpchu, on the slopes of Mt Songnisan), and then to Wolchŏngsa Temple in Kangwŏn Province, known for the quality of its Buddhist doctrinal education. By his own later admission, his decision to leave his home town in favour of the