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Rhee/The Spirit of Independence

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It has been seven long years \[sic\] that I have been in prison.\(^1\) Because I hate wasting precious time, I have tried to alleviate my suffering and anxiety by burying myself in various books that my domestic and foreign friends have loaned me from time to time.\(^2\) I could not contain my anger, at times, over current developments that set the blood inside this foolish man boiling. So, I have translated a few titles, but none of them could be published, further aggravating my heavy heart.\(^3\) For a few years, I wrote columns in the newspaper to express myself, but something intervened to stop even that.\(^4\)

At that point, the Russo-Japanese War erupted. Although I lack the ability to step forward and perform useful service, this is not the time to sit back doing nothing. Unable to hold back my excitement and agitation, I stopped my work on a Korean-English \[sic;\] English-Korean dictionary, which was in progress, and started the preparation of this book on February 19 [1904] by the solar calendar. At first, I intended to write a long statement on one sheet of paper and publish tens of thousands of copies. However, once I started, an unstoppable stream of words poured forth. I was then forced to record only the outlines of relevant events. In the meantime, prisoners were executed on several occasions while many other prisoners were moved in or out of prison, creating commotions. At such times, I felt constrained to stop my writing temporarily. Also, I had to write in secret and had to conceal [the manuscript] several times. Since my writing could not be continuous, my message is lacking in consistency. However, if one scrutinizes the main themes, [one will find that] they are interconnected and focus on the two letters, tong-nip (independence).
I refrained from using too many names of places and people and provided lengthy explanations in simple everyday language to make the book as readable as a novel or old tales. The exclusive use of the Korean script [han’gul, without using Chinese characters] was to make it easy to read for a large number of people throughout the country. Much discussion is addressed to the common people, in particular, because the future of Korea is entirely dependent on them. By and large, the people in the so-called middle or higher statuses, or those who know some Chinese letters, are mostly rotten, biased, and beyond hope. Not only are these people [in such depraved conditions], the environment in which they live is also beyond salvation. These words may sound too harsh, but one should trust that they are not false statements once one tests them against clear evidence.

My only sincere wish is that our brothers and sisters throughout the country who are uneducated, despised, young, and weak will pay special attention, become interested, try to implement [my suggestions] step by step, and also lead others, so that the people’s attitude will change, their manners will be reformed, leading to a transformation [of society] from the bottom up, with new buds sprouting from the rotten places and new life emerging from death. I so pray, and pray.

On the 29th day of June in the 4,237th Year since the Foundation of the Nation [1904].

Written by Syngman Rhee, an inmate in the Hansŏng [Seoul] Prison.
People say that a person can survive an abduction by a tiger as long as one remains alert. That being true, a defeated nation may not remain extinct forever as long as its people keep alive their spirit of independence.

Consider the independence of Greece; its brilliant success was not achieved overnight. Also consider the independence of Italy; its magnificent achievements are not the work of one individual. For many years, many people worked tirelessly with their pens and voices and shed sweat and blood, cultivating the aspirations of united peoples for independence. Since ancient times, therefore, wise men and women did not seek to become solitary heroes or heroines. Instead, they sought others to become heroes or heroines like themselves by opening the ears and the minds of the people of the whole nation in the hope that everyone would march in the same direction.

Alas! At this time when the name of the Korean nation has been altered and the Korean people have become slaves, where is the soul of the Korean nation, and where is the spirit of the Korean people? Although the nation has been caught between the foreigner’s teeth, its spirit must be preserved. Now, The Spirit of Independence, written by Mr. Syngman Rhee, has made its appearance; it is a voice that speaks for the first time in the four-thousand-year history of Korea, and it conveys information that is heard also for the first time.

The Spirit of Independence was not originally written hastily after our nation had met its demise; rather, it was written at a time when the roar of the cannons was about to fill the air in the harbor of Inch’ón at the outset of the Russo-Japanese War. Mr. Syngman Rhee was then in the sixth

Postscript
year of his incarceration on account of [his involvement in] the political turmoil of 1898. I myself had been released from prison only a few months earlier. [The manuscript] was first shown to fellow prison inmates Chŏng Sun-man, Sin Hŭng-wu [Hugh Cynn], and Yi Tong-nyŏng before I was asked for comments. Because I felt unqualified for the task, comments were solicited from Mr. Yi Sang-jae, an accomplished scholar, and the manuscript was revised afterward.

Alas! Was it because the Korean people were unlucky, or because I had not worked hard enough—a question that I cannot readily judge—that the manuscript had remained unpublished although I had so intended for a long while. I had tried everywhere to raise the substantial amount [for publication costs]. I had brought it over to the United States to publish it without delay, but a series of impediments of one type or another defeated my plans. At the end, I had to return the manuscript to its author. I deserved the blame that I was negligent toward him, and I had no defense against a charge that I had undermined a common interest of fellow compatriots.

Nevertheless, a precious jewel cannot stay hidden, and the scent of musk cannot be covered up. Euphonies of this writing resounded everywhere, leading like-minded friends to join their minds and efforts for a year to publish it at long last. On the basis of my past experience, I can well appreciate how difficult it must have been for them.

The author, those who publish this book, and I myself share a common regret and concern that the delay in publication may diminish the interest of the readers because of the intervening changes in world events and circumstances. However, because this book refers to many rules of politics and since it compares the rise and fall of our nation with those of others, all its readers will realize, first, that the author had achieved enlightenment ahead of his time, and I also believe that they will embrace the spirit of independence and become independent persons who would be of use to Korea in the future.

January of the 4,243rd Year since the Foundation of the Nation [1910].

Pak Yong-man 8s