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*Korean Buddhist Nuns and Laywomen: Hidden Histories,
Enduring Vitality*

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A Review of *Korean Buddhist Nuns and Laywomen: Hidden Histories, Enduring Vitality*

Erik Hammerstrom¹

Korean Buddhist Nuns and Laywomen: Hidden Histories, Enduring Vitality. Edited by Eun-Su Cho. Albany: SUNY Press, 2011, xiv+210 pages, ISBN 978-1438435107 (paper), \$23.95.

In the past few decades, members of the global Buddhist community have made efforts to address the disparity that exists between *bhikṣuṇī* and *bhikṣu* orders in terms of social status, religious authority, access to education, and economic support. Highlighted by various domestic organizations and international associations such as Sakyadhita, steps have been made to remedy this situation and pave the way for the equal dignity and equal standing of Buddhist women. One of the twentieth century's success stories with regard to this issue has been the revival and strengthening of the nuns order in South Korea. Eun-Su Cho, citing Martine Batchelor, says that Korean nuns enjoy one of the highest statuses among East Asian countries, second only to the nuns of Taiwan. This is remarkable given the recent history of Korean culture, which was marked by the suppression of women in general and Buddhists in particular by the intensely powerful patriarchal institution of Korean Confucianism.

With the successes Korean Buddhist women have had in establishing a place for themselves in contemporary Korean society,

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scholars have turned their attention to the “hidden histories” of these women’s predecessors. This marks a major shift in scholarship about the Korean peninsula, both by outside scholars and among Korean academics. Until now, there has been next to nothing written on the history of Korea’s nuns and lay Buddhist women. As the editor, Eun-Su Cho, puts it: “The number of writings on Korean nuns can be counted on one hand, and it is no exaggeration to say that the fruits of this academic research has been almost nonexistent until a few years ago” (4). Therefore, the articles in this volume address a lacuna that exists in scholarship on the history of Korea’s Buddhist women. These essays fill a gap, but do they do it well? Despite the volume’s brevity, the authors adopt a variety of approaches, and cover a number of different issues, which make this both a useful introduction to the topic, and something of a reference book on the available primary sources.

As befitting a prolegomenon, much (though not all) of this book is devoted to fundamental issues. Cho’s introduction and first chapter—which are really one piece—lay out the primary historical and cultural issues surrounding the events described in subsequent chapters. Her task here is primarily historical, but she also provides some of the necessary historiography, noting the paucity of available records with which to reconstruct that history, as well as the causes for the scarcity of recorded data. This sets the stage for the chapters that follow, in which each author seeks to make the best use of the records to tell part of the story of the history of Korean Buddhist women. The diversity of methodology presented in this book is one of its strengths. Some authors uncover women’s stories in order to reinstate them into their proper place in the history of Korean Buddhism, another explains the causes and nature of the oppression that they have faced, while yet another points to Buddhism as a space in which Korean women were able to creatively resist the power of patriarchy during the Chosŏn Dynasty.

Chapters four and five seek to tell the stories of how Korean women became influential social and religious figures. In chapter four,

Tonino Puggioni steps around the problem of source scarcity by examining the roles that Korean women played in Chinese and Korean expatriate Buddhism in Yuan China. These women, who were generally high-class, provided financial support for temple building, arranged for sūtra lectures to be given, and organized charitable activities. In the following chapter, Heun-sik Heo compares the biographies of two female Sōn masters, one from the thirteenth and one from the eighteenth century. These women appeared to have followed a common pattern from the Chosōn of lifelong family involvement. Both women were ordained late in life (after their child-rearing years were over), and even their ordinations served as an extension of their domestic roles. In both chapters, the authors have taken extant source material to tell a history that has not been recently attended to.

Chapters six and seven take different approaches. In chapter six, John Jorgensen identifies the causes of the suppression women faced during the Chosōn, and examines the specific nature of that suppression. He draws extensively from court records and temple gazetteers to flesh out the widely held assumption that the Confucian Chosōn Dynasty suppressed both Buddhism and women. He argues that Buddhist women were triply marginalized during this period, due to (1) the marginalization of Buddhism as a whole; (2) misogynistic attitudes within Buddhism and Confucianism; (3) women's lack of access to education. Related to these factors, Jorgensen recounts in grisly detail several legal cases involving pregnant nuns, adultery, murder by poison, and brutal investigative torture. Rather than accept the official version of these tales, Jorgensen reads between the lines to highlight the oppressive discourses at work in these accounts and how they demonstrate the difficulties that Buddhist women in Korean faced.

But this volume is not only dedicated to stories of sadness and struggle. In chapter seven, Ji-Young Jung argues that, contrary to both the official discourse of the time and historical claims today, Buddhism in the Chosōn did provide women of all ages an alternative to the

strictures of their society. Although the life was not an easy one, women joined the order of nuns in not insignificant numbers and there they made a space for themselves in which they could pursue lives removed from some of the dictates of Confucian society. Chapter eight picks up on this positive message. There, Pori Park describes the ways in which Korean nuns secured authority and relative independence for themselves during the tumultuous years of the mid-twentieth century. After their active participation in the Purification Movement that ousted married clergy from Korea's temples, these nuns established their own seminaries and Sŏn centers, which, combined with the general unity of Korean nuns, has helped them to attain the level of importance they currently hold in Korean society.

As with any edited volume, it is difficult to make general statements about the quality of this work as a whole. Some chapters are certainly more engaging than others, and certain irregularities, such as in the use of two different Chinese Romanization systems, are not always avoidable in this type of work. On balance, this work is a great success, and is an important first step in opening an area of research that will hopefully see continued expansion in the years to come.