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*New Perspectives in Modern Korean Buddhism:
Institution, Gender, and Secular Society*

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A Review of *New Perspectives in Modern Korean Buddhism: Institution, Gender, and Secular Society*

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New Perspectives in Modern Korean Buddhism: Institution, Gender, and Secular Society. Edited by Hwansoo Ilmee Kim and Jin Y. Park. Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 2022, ix + 334 pages, ISBN 978-1-4384-9131-8 (hardback), \$99.00, 978-1-4384-9132-5 (paperback), \$36.95.

New Perspectives in Modern Korean Buddhism, edited by Hwansoo Ilmee Kim and Jin Y. Park, is a much-needed supplement to Jin Y. Park's 2010 book *Makers of Modern Korean Buddhism* and a welcome addition to studies on Buddhism in Korea. The book is divided into four sections with a total of ten chapters. It examines a wide range of topics and makes an effort to rethink and reverse some overtly nationalistic trends in literature on the subject by highlighting recent scandals as well as less-studied subjects like Buddhist laypeople in South Korea. It also asks questions about Buddhism's place in secular society and its political implications in postcolonial societies. This volume touches on areas that have not been discussed in other literature and attempts to show the importance of women with

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some chapters that focus on them specifically, especially Part Two. The volume brings together key figures who research Buddhism in Korea and so the quality of scholarship is very high.

“What do Zen masters teach us today?” is a significant question posed by Jin Y. Park in Part One. To answer this, she investigates the teachings of the Sōn Master Hyeam Sōnggwan (1920-2001), who was renowned for his exacting, seemingly superhuman habits (such as never sleeping on his back and never ceasing to meditate). However, ordinary laypeople cannot be expected to live in this manner because they must work to make ends meet, in contrast to monks who are supported by the temples to which they are linked. Park recognizes this and alludes to the benefits of certain practices, drawing on the Hwadu meditation of focusing one’s mind continually on a key phrase (known as *Kanhwa Sōn*), to reach a state of sudden enlightenment, a practice introduced by Chinul (1158-1210) who drew on the teachings of the Chinese master Changlu Zongze (長蘆宗曠, ?-ca. 1107).

This section could have been explained in an easier manner to guide readers who lack expertise in this complex area. She does, nevertheless, manage to demonstrate how these practices can be connected to routine activities in our daily lives, such as cooking (so cook consciously) or hearing a bird, illustrating how our thoughts are connected to all things and phenomena (31). Park links these ideas with the “revolutionary nature” of Hyeam’s teachings related to ecological issues facing the world today, but unfortunately does not offer any real evidence of this, rather stating that Hyeam taught about building a “nature-friendly, environment-friendly civilization” (33), a common trope in Buddhist literature not just from Korea, also found in literature on Daoism. Rather, Park elaborates on how Hyeam led the Korean Jogye Order through a period of struggle and persecution, that eventually led to a more socially engaged form of Buddhism, though she highlights that Hyeam’s approach did have a sectarian side to it. The female Buddhist figure of Kim Iryōp (1896-1971) figures briefly in the chapter, presented as an alternative to male-

centered Western philosophy though she herself drew from a literary canon that was written and shaped by men, and it goes without saying that women in Korea continue to be marginalized, and the country is ranked among the worst in the OECD nations for gender equality.

Paek Yongsŏng (1864-1940), who signed the Korean Declaration of Independence, is introduced in Mark A. Nathan's chapter as "one of the most fascinating figures in the history of early modern Korean Buddhism" (47). He is also responsible for translating Buddhist scriptures from Classical Chinese to Han'gŭl, something the Catholics and Protestants had already started doing to gain converts, though this link is not mentioned, and would have shown how Buddhists were adapting strategies used by rival religions.

Nathan attempts to break down more simplistic binary narratives of Paek's life as a traditionalist/progressive reformer under the Japanese government in Korea during the relatively brief colonial period (1910-1945), compared with the long histories of colonialism in other countries such as Ireland and Vietnam. Korean monks often worked closely with Japanese counterparts, having suffered more persecution by Korean governments during the Chosŏn dynasty. Before suggesting that drawing on Anne Blackburn's work *Locations of Buddhism*, with its focus on "microhistories," might offer a different way forward, Nathan reviews the literature by scholars like Henrik Sørensen, Huh Woosung, and Kim Kwangsik. He then moves on to discuss the possible benefits of networks and systems theories, though he does not apply them to Paek or his life/teachings, but concludes that maybe his role was to "help remake Buddhism in Korea at this time" (66). Nathan finishes by pointing out how Paek was involved in seeking to propagate the faith to the general public while rejecting some of the influences of Japanese Buddhism in Korea (using strategies employed by Protestants in Korea during the colonial period). As with many other Buddhists of the era, Nathan correctly presents Paek as a product of his time, juggling colonial constraints, the repression of the past, and the intricacies of the present.

Part Two explores the transmission and growth of Buddhism from the end of the Chosŏn dynasty through the early twentieth century via the lens of nuns and laywomen. The article by Hwansoo Kim describes the significant influence of a very high-ranking court lady, Ch'ŏn Ilch'ŏng (1848-1934?), primarily in relation to her support of the monk Yi Hoegwang (1862-1932). Lady Ch'ŏng's support was mostly financial, but she also leveraged her social connections with prominent members of the Korean royal family, and officials in the Japanese government while she was visiting Japan. When Buddhists were prohibited from entering cities throughout the Chosŏn dynasty, Kim emphasizes how these women-maintained contacts with monasteries and frequently supported temples, demonstrating a certain level of economic independence. Lady Ch'ŏn is portrayed as a powerful mediator for the Japanese who sent her to report on members of the Korean royal family in Japan, where accounts of her appeared even in Japanese newspapers—she reported back that the Korean prince was being treated very well and “in good hands,” not taken as hostage as the king and queen of Korea viewed it (79). Monk Hoegwang received his position as abbot of Haein Monastery due to Lady Ch'ŏn's influence related to the financial backing she gained for the monastery, eventually leading to the establishment of a new modern Buddhist temple organization, the Wŏnjong, hoping to reintroduce Buddhism back into the nation's capital, Seoul. Hoegwang founded the first journal for Korean Buddhism with Ch'ŏn's financial and political support, and she was the first author to publish a section in *Han'gŭl* that also emphasizes the significant contribution made by women to the revival of the faith in Korea at a time when Protestantism was spreading quickly.

Kim does an excellent job of presenting Ch'ŏn's commitment to Buddhism through an analysis of her article “A Word of Warning for [Buddhist] Female Believers,” presenting her as a “socially engaged and modern Buddhist woman” (89) who rejected the ways in which women had been oppressed during the Chosŏn dynasty, while noting that Buddhism had also been prejudiced against women whilst too often caught up in meditation instead of saving people (89-91). It may have been clearer how

exceptional Lady Ch'ŏn's role was if there had been a reflection of neo-Confucian intellectuals' critique of Buddhism during the Chosŏn dynasty and more information about how women were constrained by societal standards that typically rendered them submissive to males.

The nun Chŏng Suok (1902-1966) is the subject of Eun-su Cho's article, which explores her remarkable life: she lived through colonial times, the Korean War, and national divide. Cho emphasizes the cross-cultural exchange of concepts and techniques that occurred as Suok visited Japan, making observations about the country's female Buddhist community, and drawing comparisons to the difficult circumstances Korean nuns faced at home. She observed that in Japan, where many temples revere their founding patriarchs even more than they do the Buddha, nuns received an extremely high level of education comparable to that of their male counterparts, leaving her to wonder why no temples in Korea revered Korean masters like Wŏnhyo and Ŭisang.

Suok was critical in her observations as well, noting that certain temples simply adhere to a particular interpretation of Buddhism or concentrate on a particular text while disparaging all other kinds and schools: she criticizes the Nichiren temple (where she was bored), preferring the Rinzai Zen school. She is most critical of "the wretched status of nuns in Korea" (107), and she is moved by the fact that nuns in Japan have their own meditation halls. She is portrayed in a very convincing way as a leading figure among Korean women who practiced Buddhism. She fought tenaciously to end the practice of male monks seeing female nuns as inferior and denying them access to the same education. Then, shortly after her return from Japan, it is not surprising to learn how Suok became the first *Dharma* teacher at a seminary for nuns. Suok was also active in the purification movement that developed after the Korean War, when many monasteries had to be rebuilt. This movement highlighted the work done by Korean nuns to restore temples and to purge married monks, a practice that gained popularity during the colonial era. For these feats, as well as her teachings, Myŏngsŏng (b. 1930), who pledged herself as a disciple and

performed a “formal dharma transmission ceremony” (115), honored Suok’s *Dharma* lineage, and the article exemplifies how women could inspire other women as a source of Buddhist authority by assisting in the establishment of temples for women.

Part Three discusses a number of issues, including clerical celibacy and marriage, that have existed since the turn of the twentieth century and have frequently been misunderstood in relation to Korea’s colonial experience, as well as current scandals that are ultimately related to broken monastic rules. The chapter by Jeongeun Park is significant because it makes an effort to refute simplistic nationalistic narratives about the choices made by monks to marry during the colonial era. The general anti-Japanese narrative suggests that monks who married collaborated and that imported practices such as getting married and eating meat had been forced on Korean Monks (*bhikṣu*). The number of monks increased throughout the early colonial period, and Park uses some concrete examples to demonstrate how some temple ordinances enacted by the Japanese government in Korea reflected indigenous Korean Buddhist traditions (133-136). In contrast to Japan, where “the practice of monastic marriage and meat eating” was officially sanctioned by the government, in Korea “the colonial government imposed strong restrictions on clerical marriage and meat eating and specified them in the temple laws” (137). In order to understand how Korean monks interpreted the temple laws in relation to their own traditional Buddhist system, Park then chose two temple sites for her study. In doing so, she discovered that even some head monks were already married before the colonial government’s temple laws were put into place, and that even after they were put into place the colonial government refused to accept responsibility for the growth of clerical marriage. The paradoxical position where married monks might run for high-level temple jobs yet “their electors had to be unmarried” (148) is emphasized by Park.

The chapter by Su Jung Kim carries on the same theme and focuses on married monks and their “secret” spouses. She lists other recent

scandals involving Buddhists, such as falsifying credentials, but emphasizes that given the dominance of the Jogye Order in Korea, which promotes celibacy, the “moral laxity” of monks in such “marriages” continues to be what Koreans find most shocking today. It is a pity that this chapter only focuses on male monks who violate their vows and not female nuns, as the author mentions (160), as it is not impossible that female nuns have secret lovers (female or male) too. However, another topic that could be brought up in relation to this issue is the potential for homosexual and lesbian relationships among the Buddhist clergy, which has not been addressed, reflecting how such notions are still taboo in South Korea today.

Kim, too, emphasizes that clerical marriage was not imposed on Korean monks; in fact, prominent monks such as Han Yongun (1879-1944) saw this as a means of modernization, drawing the ire of monks such as Paek Yongsŏng who was vehemently opposed to it. Yet by 1920 more than fifty percent of monks were married—of course, female nuns could not marry, discriminated against by Buddhists just as they had been by Confucians. In recent years, different Buddhist groups have protested this practice of having “secret” wives as it is not so secret, and they call for the “purging” of such corruption (168). Kim ends the chapter with references to such immoral practices of much lauded monks of the past, such as Wŏnhyo, who was known for being a drunk and for fathering a son with a princess, suggesting that this reflects “the Korean Buddhist tradition’s rather ambiguous position on sexual transgression” (171), further complicated by the hypocrisy of such overt veneration of nationally glorified “immoral” monks. Kim makes a significant point to remind readers that married and single monks both played key roles in the anti-Japanese campaign in Korea. Indeed, Han Yongun, who supported clerical marriage, was involved in the writing of the Korean Declaration of Independence.

The chapter on “Monastic Regulations in Contemporary Korea” by Uri Kaplan emphasizes the detrimental effects of scandals in recent years, particularly on the Jogye Order, underscoring one incident from 1994 when the administrative head of the order who had been exiled “hired

thugs to violently beat monks and laymen who protested against him” (181). As Kaplan notes, Koreans continue to hold Buddhist monks to a high standard of moral purity as evidenced by the fallout from the scandals and the reduced esteem the order has received. This should seem self-evident, and historically there have been attempts by monks such as Chajang (590-658) and Chinul to restore the respect from the *saṅgha* who have been disappointed by the conduct of monks and the financial dubiousness of monasteries.

In his analysis of recent attempts by monasteries to adapt the *Vinaya* rules to modern circumstances, including rules on things like cars and cell phones, Kaplan reflects on how Buddhist *Vinaya* rules were developed over time (drawing on Indian and Chinese *Vinayas*). He also outlines the *Vinaya* literature drawn up by Korean monks of the past still studied in Korean monasteries today, such as Wŏnhyo’s text *Arouse the Mind and Practice* (發心修行章, K. *Balsim suhaeng jang*): the monk who violated the very Buddhist precepts relating to sex and alcohol consumption he sought to instill in novice monks! Kaplan also looks at the recent creation of precept courts by the Jogye Order to “evaluate and distribute punishments” to those who break the rules, which largely ignores issues related to sex and meat consumption but instead focuses on “material and financial vice” (192), as these are what have harmed Buddhists’ reputations in Korea the most, and *Vinayas* have always evolved in response to social criticisms. The chapter does a good job of capturing the mounting difficulties that morally rigid religious organizations encounter in contemporary secular society.

Han Yongun, perhaps one of the most prominent monks in contemporary Korean Buddhism, and Fukuzawa Yukichi (1835-1901), who saw “modernity as the bright side of colonialism” (214), are the subjects of Gregory N. Evon’s article, which opens Part Four. The chapter ultimately examines the undulating changing identities that tested how both Koreans and Japanese perceived themselves (and each other) in a “modernizing” world where China was no longer at the center. According to

Evon, “the increasing weakness of the Chosŏn dynasty coincided with an increasingly robust culture of commercial publication in which Buddhists actively participated” (224). This is evidenced by the enormous volume of Buddhist literature that was created in Korea during this time. Han Yongun, who was also a nationalist with anti-Japanese sentiments, benefited from this release from a Confucian-dominated Chosŏn dynasty and saw the opportunity to make Buddhism relevant in the contemporary era. This represents the “multiple possibilities” and “multiple identities” that intersect in people’s lives and affect how they view themselves and each “other,” as Evon deftly alludes to in his conclusion. These fluid “identities” are encapsulated in Han’s 1939 novel, *A Miserable Fate* (K. *Panmyŏng*), which ultimately reflects the author’s dedication to the ideals of Buddhism (and its teaching of compassion) above all else. They also represent interactions from the past as well as an opening up to new ideas that will shape the future.

Cheonhak Kim’s article thoughtfully reevaluates the life and contributions of Kim Kugyŏng (1899-1950?), a scholar who was to suffer criticisms like many others who engaged with the Japanese during the colonial period, something that did not stop a military dictator like Park Chung Hee from prevailing as long as he helped to kick-start the Korean economy. Kim Kugyŏng lived in Japan, Beijing, Manchuria, and of course Korea during a complicated time and he suffered setbacks on different fronts, taking a Japanese name, though careful to highlight the historical achievements of Koreans regarding the printing technology of the Koryŏ period. His academic accomplishments are difficult to dismiss, especially in light of the way Cheonhak Kim’s article outlines them. The significance of the Buddhist writings discovered in 1907 at the Mogao caves near Dunhuang, as well as the importance of Marc Aurel Stein and Paul Pelliot, who are mentioned in the article (239), could have been described with greater precision for the reader. Sir Marc Aurel Stein (1862-1943) was a very important Hungarian-born British archaeologist and linguist who discovered thousands of texts in the cave complex; Paul Pelliot (1878-1945) was a French sinologist who arrived soon after Stein at the caves,

but, unlike Stein, he could read and appreciate the manuscripts. Both men purchased many of the documents very cheaply. Kim played a crucial role in bringing these discoveries to light in the transnational context of East Asia and the Japanese Empire at that time, demonstrating his own linguistic abilities (in Classical Chinese, Manchurian, and Japanese). This is demonstrated by the fact that Kim was compiling documents from the finds of both of these men so soon afterward. Kim's *Ginger Garden Collection* consists of corrected versions of texts from this Buddhist treasure trove, though as Cheonhak Kim's article points out, "Kim's research is not fully recognized in his motherland even now" (241).

As a result of the impressive ethnographic research Florence Galmiche conducted over a lengthy period of time with laypeople at temples in Korea, the book's final essay serves as an excellent conclusion. She points out that one of the main concerns of Korean Buddhists today is the spread of the faith at a time when millions of people in South Korea actively practice Christianity. Korean Buddhist orders would like to see the growth of Buddhist communities that are active and outwardly visible and that clearly interact with and practice Buddhist principles in daily life. Galmiche comments on how many monks are not entirely happy with people who frequent temples with "prayers for good fortune" (such as mothers who only go to temples when their children are doing exams), which is contrasted with "correct prayers" (257). The former ties in with "practical religiosity" and this is what the Buddhist temples want to see change. To further assist with the integration of the laity, they have established a variety of propagation centers, and have also made numerous educational programs available at temples in cities, educating both current and potential members on the core teachings of Buddhism. The Buddhists' seeming disengagement from laypeople and their social existence (especially the monks who withdrew to the remote temples) has drawn criticism from laypeople themselves, such as those connected with Minjung Buddhism. As Galmiche notes, "Together with other goals, education and community building among laypeople aim to contribute to a collective Buddhist identity that is expected to reinforce the place of

Buddhism in society” (261), but some of the women she spoke with were critical of older generations who really had no deep understanding of Buddhism. This chapter emphasizes the crucial part that women played in the past and present in the spread of religion. Even though the majority of Koreans live in cities and frequent nearby temples, the stereotype of ascetic mountain monks continues to be respected, and an increasing number of laypeople make pilgrimages to these more remote temples, many of which are steeped in hundreds of years of history and are definitely worth a visit if one ever travels to Korea.

This is a cogent collection of essays that cover a wide range of interconnected subjects and offer some fresh perspectives on discourses on Korean Buddhism using novel research methods. Although at times they could have been connected with other faiths to demonstrate how these religions were engaging with changing times (such as Protestantism’s promotion of the use of Han’gŭl), the various parts manage to weave together the many topics in a generally organic way, which is not always an easy task in edited volumes. Although Galmiche attempts to address certain gender-related concerns, more consideration for women, both laywomen and Buddhist nuns, might have been given in the selection of articles. One complaint would be that there are no images. Especially for readers who are interested in learning more about contemporary Korean Buddhism, it would have been helpful to connect them visually with the material culture and contexts of the subject.

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