Korean Buddhism at the Crossroads:
In Search of a New Paradigm for Early Modern and Modern Korean Buddhist Studies

Compiled Abstracts

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Early Chosŏn Buddhism in Chŏlla

The impact of the Koryŏ-Chosŏn transition on the Buddhist establishment in Korea is generally understood in current scholarship to have been a negative one. It is generally assumed that Buddhist monasteries underwent a radical reduction in size and number and their wealth confiscated to replenish the empty royal fisc. There is also a tendency to assume that this restructuring of the Buddhist establishment—often misinterpreted as its “decline”—was orchestrated and executed by the new Neo-Confucian Chosŏn government. This paper takes issue with this top-down view of the transformation of Buddhism in early Chosŏn Korea. Although the Chosŏn government did make a heavy-handed attempt to exert greater control over the Buddhist establishment, this paper argues that the fate of monasteries in the two Chŏlla provinces like Paegyang-sa, Paengnyŏn-sa, Songgwang-sa, and Wŏlnam-sa had less to do with state-led efforts than with complex negotiations that took place between the government, local families, and Buddhist monastic communities. It has been shown that the government's recognition of eighty-eight chabok monasteries in 1408 was the product of negotiations between local Buddhist communities and the government. Behind the recognition of Chŏlla monasteries we similarly find negotiations between the government and prominent local families such as the Kosŏng Yi. As this paper will show, concerns about center-periphery relations, spiritual lineage and monastery ownership, famines, border security, elite family credentials, and the local economy played a critical role in these negotiations and thus the shaping of the fate of Chŏlla-area monasteries during the early Chosŏn period.

Gregory EVON (University of New South Wales-Sydney)

J.S. Gale (1863-1937), Korean Buddhism, and the International Religious-Intellectual Context of the Late 19th and Early 20th Centuries

Based on the references to Buddhist journals (specifically, 海東佛報, which ran from 1913-1914) and internal “diary” dates in the portions of J.S. Gale’s (1863-1937) notebooks that deal with Buddhism, it seems that his interest in Buddhism coincided with his translation work on A Nine Cloud Dream (九雲夢), which was published in 1922. It seems that Gale used his notebooks to make first drafts of possible topics for publication, to sketch out translations, and/or to pursue topics of interest. The fact that Gale was “studying” Buddhism in this way is significant, because it attests to the influence of Korean Buddhist journals and commercial publication more generally. What Gale was studying is also significant. His main interest was the history of Buddhism in Korea. A careful reading of the circumstances surrounding the publication of Gale’s English translation of A Nine Cloud Dream suggests that this work was situated in a complex international intellectual-religious context. Commercial publication was at the very center. My purpose in this talk is to outline the key features of this intellectual-religious context through Gale’s work on Buddhism, taking into account both domestic and international publication.
Master Seongcheol and Modernity of Korean Buddhism

Can the Mahāyāna teachings be the teaching of the historical Buddha? It has been one of the key questions among Korean Buddhists after the encounter with the outcome of the Western philological studies on the Buddhist texts. Nowadays, there hardly is anyone who claims both the Saddharmapuṇḍarīkasūtra and the Avatamsakasūtra were produced during the time of the historical Buddha. Traditionally however these texts, core texts within the East Asian Mahāyāna Buddhist tradition, had been regarded as the word of the Buddha (buddhavacana). Master Seongcheol (1912-1993), one of the most representative modern Korean seon (Korean equivalent of the Japanese zen and of the Chinese chan) masters, was the one who realized the seriousness of this problems.

As the 6th Patriarch of the Korean Buddhist Jorge Order, he spread Buddhism domestically and internationally through his simple and acute teachings and disciplined life. In 1967 he became the head of the monastic teaching Centre in Haein temple which is famous for preserving the 84,000 woodblocks of the Tipitaka Koreana. During the summer retreat, he gave dharma talks to the assembled monks and nuns together with laity for two to three hours every morning. His sermons went on for almost a hundred days, until the end of the summer retreat. These dharma talks were recorded and later in 1992 published as a book entitled ‘Sermon of One Hundred Days’.

In this book, he clarified that the theory of the middle pass could be the core of Buddhism, and he tried to explain all Buddhist philosophy and doctrinal history in light of the middle pass. In 2010 this book was translated into English and published by Equinox under the monograph series from Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies. This paper will deal with master Seongcheol’s life and his idea of the middle pass in terms of the problems concerning the nature of the Mahāyāna teachings and of the buddhavacana.
Trees are of a special meaning for Buddhism. There are Aśoka tree, Jambu tree, Bodhi tree, and Sala tree frequently appeared in the early canon. Those trees seem to be linked with the Buddha’s life story and to have symbolic as well as metaphorical connotation. The Aśoka tree is connected with the birthplace of the Buddha, the Jambu tree is associated with the site of the Buddha’s first meditation, the Bodhi tree is related to Enlightenment and the Sala tree is allied with Nirvāṇa, the final departure of the Buddha. While trees are important symbolically in the Buddha’s biography, they can also have a practical use in the Buddhist world. That is to say, trees are the main component of the Buddhist canon, *tripitaka*, which is written on leaf or carved on the wood of trees. It’s true that the Buddha himself is very important, going closer to him is mainly dependent on the record of his teaching. In this respect the Buddhist canon seems to be more important than the historical Buddha himself for Buddhist laity. That is where the tree and leaf recording his teaching have their importance.

To make palm leaf manuscripts, a new shoot of a large palm-leaf is split into thin strips and boiled with some other materials like leaves of mango and papaya etc. It is dried, scrubbed and cut to the same size. Then we inscribe with a metal stylus, spread ink there and polish up the leaves with flour. The ink is left in the letter grooves. In East Asia, from 11th century Song dynasty China began the creation of woodblock *tripitaka*. The process is much bigger, so that it cannot be done at an individual level. It was done on a national scale. At the same time, the creation of woodblock became a measure of the nation’s power because their creation requires a huge number of trees, sawing technology, high-quality human resources who those hand-writers, engravers, lacquerers and paper manufactures etc. Thus producing woodblock *tripitaka* took a long time, for example 16 years in the case of *tripitaka Koreana*. Leaf manuscripts and woodblocks from trees were totally different cultural developments in terms of writing and press. The leaf is for reading, while the woodblock is purely for press printing as a kind of early press machine, developed along with paper, which was not present in Southeast Asia.
Seong-Uk KIM (Columbia University)

**Buddhist Compromise and Reconciliation with Confucianism in Late Chosŏn: through the example of the Kwanŭm (Avalokiteśvara) divination practice**

There are two different views on Chosŏn Buddhism. One says that Chosŏn Buddhism was almost dead because of yangban Confucians’ persecution of Buddhism. The other argues that there were actually many yangbans who supported Buddhism financially and ideologically, though in private level, which helped Buddhist survive and even thrive in the Confucian society. Although these two views have their own rationales, they emphasize the role of yangbans too much to the point of almost ignoring the story of the Buddhist side in interactions with yangban Confucians. This paper tries to discover the active agency of Buddhist monks during Chosŏn by investigating how Buddhist monks accommodated their religion to the Confucian dominant society of Chosŏn. Especially, it examines how Chosŏn Buddhist monks made Buddhism more attractive to yangban Confucians through the example of the Kwanŭm divination practice which developed, based on the Kwanŭm yŏnggwa, in the late Chosŏn. This examination will offer another aspect to look at the interactions and intersections between Buddhism and Confucianism in the late Chosŏn.

Sujung KIM (DePauw University)

**Flesh in the Closet: The “Secret Wife” in Contemporary Korean Buddhism**

In recent years a series of scandals of the Chogye Order has received extensive media exposure and public attention in South Korea. Among these scandals, the most unsettling for both Buddhist followers and the general public has been the accusation that several senior leaders have maintained secret wives. Whether or not their alleged misconduct is true, these scandals have irreversibly damaged the authority and reputation of not just the Order itself, but Korean Buddhism at large. This paper takes up the so-called “secret wife” issue with particular reference to its historical, religious, and social conditions and contexts. While the secret wife issue can be extremely personal and elusive in nature, the paper highlights the colonial and post-colonial contexts in which accusations of having a secret wife originated, grew, and entered public discourse and criticism. The paper argues that the recurring controversies around the secret wife are neither an internal, isolated issue nor a simple moral breach of the Order. Rather, the secret wife issue is symptomatic of deeper sociohistorical problems that were left unresolved in the decolonization process in South Korean Buddhism. The paper begins with a discussion of the historical context that gave rise to the recent secret wife controversy in the Order and continues by examining examples of the accusations about secret wives reported in the public press. The paper then contextualizes the secret wife issue and explains how the practice could gain a certain level of tolerance, particularly in light of the more general growth of secrecy in contemporary Korean Buddhism.
Erasing and Reshaping the Emperor’s Space: 
A Hybridized Avalokiteśvara Hall at Songgwang Temple

By examining the foundation and later modifications of Avalokiteśvara Hall at Songgwang Temple, this paper explores the complex history of negotiation, resistance, and reformation by Korea’s Buddhist community at a time of rapid political changes in the twentieth century. During the Korean Empire (1897-1910), Emperor Kojong (r. 1863-1897), seeking to modernize his country, sponsored Buddhist art and architecture more heavily than his Chosŏn dynasty (1392-1910) predecessors, which resulted in new types of Buddhist monuments. A good example is the Kirosowŏndang 僧僧僧僧僧 building (which later changed to Avalokiteśvara Hall) founded inside Songgwang Temple in 1903. This building was erected to congratulate Emperor Kojong on entering Kiroso 像 僑 , an association of high scholar-officials over 60 years old. It enshrined a special wooden plaque that presented the emperor’s body, and was used for rituals praying for the emperor’s longevity. While a handful of studies have examined the original building structure and the meaning of its murals, the building’s modifications after the fall of the Korean Empire in 1910 has not been adequately studied. With the collapse of the empire, the building underwent radical changes in order to fit the new socio-political environments of Korea’s Buddhist community of Korea. Based on documents and manuscripts remaining at Songgwang Temple, black-and-white photographs from the early twentieth century, and interviews with local monks, this paper traces the hall’s transformation until it became a hybrid space for the worship of Avalokiteśvara bodhisattva in 1957 and functioned as a repository for the monastery’s old Buddhist paintings until the 1990s.
Buddhism, Cloning, and Regenerative Narrative Affects in early 21st Century South Korea

“I am a Buddhist, and I have no philosophical problem with cloning,” South Korean scientist Hwang Woo-suk told journalists in early 2004 while he sat high up in the Seattle Space Needle five hundred feet above what was once the U.S. Science Pavilion. Just a few days earlier, at an American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) event, Hwang reported success in cloning a human embryo using DNA taken from an adult human cell. The following year, Hwang and the South Korean nation would become embroiled in what became known as the Hwang Woo-suk stem cell research scandal. In this paper, I highlight the various discursive overlaps and connections made between Buddhism and Hwang’s science. I explore these bio-political religious technologies and the appearance of specific narratives and tropes that were employed by pro-Hwang Korean Buddhist groups during and after the South Korean stem cell research scandal. Moreover, I will contemplate the continued resonance of this regenerative Buddhist narrative affects while detailing some of Hwang’s more recent activities.
Mark A. NATHAN (*University at Buffalo*)

“Litigating Celibacy: What the ‘Purification Movement’ Reveals about Buddhism, Law, and the State in Twentieth-Century Korea”

On November 24, 1960, six young monks surreptitiously entered the Supreme Court building in Seoul, South Korea, and proceeded to disembowel themselves in the office of the Chief Justice in order to protest a ruling handed down that same day. When this news, along with rumors of the monks’ death, spread outside the courthouse among the crowd of some four hundred monks, nuns, and lay Buddhists who had gathered there, many of them stormed the building, leading to over three hundred arrests. None of the six young monks actually died from their wounds, but all of them were nonetheless arrested, prosecuted, and sentenced. The issue at the heart of the legal ruling that day was directly related to the so-called ‘purification movement’ (*chŏnghwa undong*), in which a minority faction of celibate monks publicly denounced the majority of married monks in the country as both contrary to the *vinaya* precepts and a negative by-product of Japanese colonialism. The movement came to a head from the mid-1950s, after the Korean War, when battles for control of the administrative organs of the monastic order, as well as the vast majority of its temples and assets, erupted in South Korean society. Although the methods used to oust the married faction were varied, and admittedly not always peaceful, such a task could not have been accomplished without the intervention of the state, powerful political leaders, and the secular courts. This paper looks at the lawsuits and legal actions that were taken in the course of this confrontation in an effort to understand how the courts became one of the main battlegrounds in this dispute over the issue of celibacy and the ostensible purity of the *sangha*. It asks what we might learn from the history of litigating celibacy, not to mention the attendant question of adjudicating religious authority using secular laws, and what that history reveals about the relationship between Buddhism, law, and the state in Korea from the middle of the twentieth century.

The periodic seminar titled ‘A Study for the Improvement of Sangha Education of the Jogye Order’ (hereafter ‘the seminar’ or ‘the report’) was held on 12th July 2018 at the International Conference Hall of the Korean Buddhist History & Culture Museum. The seminar was hosted by the Education Institute, the division responsible for the education of monks at the Jogye Order.

The focus of the main topic was monks’ changing education environment. This change is largely divided into six categories: 1) decrease of births, 2) decrease of applicants, 3) aging of applicants, 4) rapidly changing education environment, 5) teaching ability of educators, and 6) education finance.

According to the report, there has been a considerable reduction in the number of the ordained, and the average age of applicants is increasing. It has subsequently led to a depletion of monks entering the priesthood and providing dharma preaching in the field. The report states that this problem originates from the outdated educational system of the Jogye Order. Given that the contemporary educational system of Korean society is changing rapidly, the Jogye Order has failed to follow this trend. Finally, the report concludes with several suggestions for the improvement of Buddhist education for monks.

Actually, the discussions on this matter have been constant so far. Nevertheless, there have been no major changes. Therefore, we will critically examine whether the analysis and resolution of the latest Jogye Order report are appropriate. If there is a problem, we will look at what it is and then see if there are any better alternative solutions.
A Monk’s Double Identity and the Issue of Clerical Marriage: An Examination of Kim Chŏnghae’s Household Registers in Colonial Korea

Regarding the issue of clerical marriage, one of the most misleading fallacies is that the spread of clerical marriage among Korean monks was an outcome of the revision of temple laws in 1926 by the Japanese colonial government. However, no conclusion of Korean monks’ marriage practice during the colonial period can be complete without examining primary sources and evidence. My paper will revisit the issue of clerical marriage by examining the household registers of Korean monks who lived during the colonial period. Monks’ household registers tell us a different story, namely that clerical marriage was already a common practice among Korean monks before the government decided to revise temple laws in 1926. In particular, this paper will focus on the double identity of a monk called Kim Chŏnghae. Kim Chŏnghae was a Korean monk who studied in Japan in the 1910s and served as an abbot and head monk in 1920s Colonial Korea. His double identity, i.e., having two household registers, one as a celibate monk and the other as a married man, is a noticeable example of the reality of clerical marriage and the relationship between the Buddhist policy of the Japanese colonial government and the practice of clerical marriage among Korean monks.

Women and Buddhism: The Case of Kim Iryŏp

Women and Buddhism: how and where do they meet? This is the primary question I aim to address in this presentation. To this end, I will explore the life and thoughts of a twentieth century Korean Zen Master, Kim Iryŏp (1896-1971), the first generation Korean feminist and a writer who became a Zen Buddhist nun. Iryŏp’s life and her Buddhism demonstrate a multi-layered encounter between women and Buddhism in a woman’s search for identity and meaningful life. In this context, I will also discuss the meaning of autobiography, narrative identity, writing as testimony, and meaning construction in our daily existence.
Pori PARK (Arizona State University)

The Emergence and Development of New Buddhist Sects in Modern Korea, focusing on T’aego, Ch’ont’ae, and Chingak Orders.

This paper intends to fill the gap of research in modern Korean Buddhism by focusing on three non-Chogye Buddhist Order, T’aego, Ch’ont’ae, and Chingak Orders. Since liberation from Japan in 1945, Eighteen Buddhist sects have established in Korea. Forty more Buddhist sects appeared in rush since the abolition of the Buddhist Property Law (Pulgyo jaesan kwalli pob), by which the government controlled the management of Buddhist properties, in 1988. More than sixty sects are currently active. However, the academic studies on modern Korean Buddhism has centered on the largest, powerful Chogye order. This paper will examine these three Buddhist sects in relation to the Chogye order in light of such major issues, which the Chogye order has dealt with, as modernity, colonialism, nationalism, and globalization. While the Chogye order has so intricately intertwined with politics and internal conflicts, these sects in particular grew rapidly and made themselves distinctive among other minor sects. These new sects also followed the similar path of establishing their identities in modern context like the Chogye order, and each of them strove to distinguish itself from the rest Buddhist sects. For example, T’aego sect is appeared as a main rival order with the celibate Chogye sect as a married sect. Ch’ont’ae is well known for its dramatic growth in urban ministry, and Chingak is for its social and educational involvement. They claimed to have paid more attention to the involvement with the laity while the Chogye sect focused on re-establishing monastic communities.
Maya STILLER (University of Kansas)

Visualizing the Bodhisattva Path? The Ritual Matrix of Fifty-Three Buddhas in Late Chosŏn Korea

While contemporary scholarship has discussed Songgwangsa primarily as the locale for a meditational tradition that began with the eminent mid-Koryŏ period monk Chinul (1158-1210), this paper highlights an aspect of Songgwangsa's Chosŏn period history that has hitherto escaped scholarly attention. Based on an examination of donor records, objects installed inside sculptures, and Buddhist ritual manuals, I argue that in the late Chosŏn period, Songgwangsa was an influential center of Avataṃsaka doctrine established by the followers of a regional Buddhist school. Leaders of this school constructed a hall dedicated to the Fifty-Three Buddhas, which set a regional trend for the Buddhas' worship. While lay devotees bowed and chanted the names of the Fifty-Three Buddhas hoping to gain merit for happiness in the mundane world and rebirth in a Pure Land, meditational monks conducted repentance rituals to facilitate their progress on the bodhisattva path. My study not only reveals that Avataṃsaka thought was an integral part of late Chosŏn period Buddhist practice, but it also provides an unusual, later example for the worship of Fifty-Three Buddhas in East Asia (similar examples from Ming/Qing China or Tokugawa Japan have not been found so far).

Hyangsoon YI (University of Georgia)

Reviving Bhiksuni Pongnyŏgwan, the Reviver of Buddhism on Cheju Island

Pongnyŏgwan (1865–1938) is a bhiksuni who single-handedly transformed the religious topography of Cheju Island in the early twentieth century by reinstituting Buddhism, which had disappeared for nearly two centuries. Her vital contribution to today’s Buddhist community on the island, however, is hardly known to islanders, let alone to mainlanders. Her distinct place in the history of Cheju Buddhism was brought to light for the first time in 2006 when her Dharma descendants introduced her at a conference held on the lives and practices of Korean Buddhist nuns. Pongnyŏgwan founded several temples that have served as the main centers of Cheju Buddhism, such as Kwanŭmsa and Pŏpchŏngsa. More importantly, her distinct leadership in the anti-Japanese movement has also begun to surface recently. But details of her extraordinary life have been obliterated, and only small pockets of Buddhists in Cheju recognize her name in association with the colorful lore of her “miracle” work. While troubled historiography is more commonly found in reconstructing the nun’s achievement than the monk’s, Pongnyŏgwan’s is an especially poignant case, as attempts to erase her historic legacies continue to be made even in the present moment. In my presentation, I will first survey the state of Buddhism on the island in the Chosŏn period to provide a socio-historical context for her maverick appearance. Against this backdrop, the amazing life path of Pongnyŏgwan will be traced. This will be followed by a discussion of how and why her indelible footprint has been systematically erased and of how it can be revived in full integrity. My presentation will address the unique characteristics of Buddhist practice in Cheju, including the odd co-existence of blind reverence for and baseless denigration of Pongnyŏgwan’s larger-than-life imagery.
This paper will explore the ways in which Sot’aesan 少太山 Pak Chungbin 朴重彬 (1891-1943), the founder of the Society for the Study of the Buddhadharma (pulpŏp yŏn’guhoe 佛法硏究會) (1924), the group which evolved into the mature Wŏnbulgyo 圓佛教 (Won Buddhism) tradition, and his disciples responded to the colonial situation and interpreted the new trend of modernity by reforming Korean Buddhism in the early twentieth century. This examination will allow us to rediscover not only the multiple voices of various common people regarding class, gender, region, and status, but also their daily life values in understanding both the colonizer Japan as well as the indigenous tradition of Korean Buddhism. In this paper in particular, Sot’aesan’s invention of new Buddhist practices such as “mindfulness practice” and “diary writing,” his reinterpretation of “kanhwa meditation” for the common people, his construction of a new set of Buddhist ideals, and his innovative development of a modern Buddhist economic system will be introduced as a way of showing how the new trend of modernity was reinterpreted from below through the lens of Korean Buddhism, and in turn, how a new, modern form of Buddhism was created in the context of the broader East Asian Buddhist tradition.