

“The Mystery of the Century:” Lay Buddhist Monk Villages (*Chaegasŭngch'on*) Near Korea's Northernmost Border, 1600s–1960s*

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This article examines the history of the villages of lay monks (*chaegasŭng*) near North Korea's northernmost border. These communities had been ignored for centuries until they suddenly became the object of scholarly and public attention when Korea fell under Japanese colonial rule (1910–1945). The men of the villages were called “lay monks.” They shaved their heads, had wives and children, and had more than one ethnic identity. Despite the sizable number of lay monk villages in this region, their long history and, more importantly, their monastic identity and Buddhist lifestyle, narratives about these communities are almost absent in the historiography of Korean Buddhism. The absence of a written history is ascribed to that historiography's privileged focus on the influential figures, doctrines, texts, and schools that contributed to the protection of the state. Colonial experiences and national divisions have reinforced these elite- and nation-centered narratives about Korean Buddhism to the exclusion of its more pluralistic, local dimensions on the periphery. If the history of these lay monk communities is understood within the context of Chosŏn Buddhism (1392–1910) placed under the Neo-Confucian hegemony of the Chosŏn dynasty, then clearly the existence of these communities is not an anomaly developed independently, but instead is an integral part of Korean Buddhism.

Keywords: Lay monks (*chaegasŭng*), Jurchen, Chosŏn Buddhism, monastic identity, colonialism

*This article was written during a period of fellowship research funded by the Korea Foundation and facilitated by the generous administrative support of the Kyujanggak Institute of Korean Studies. I am deeply grateful to both institutions.

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Seoul Journal of Korean Studies 26, no. 2 (December 2013): 269–305.

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