

Book Notes

New Perspectives on Modern Korean Buddhism edited by Hwansoo Ilmee Kim and Jin Y. Park. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2022. 334 pp.

In the introduction, editor Hwansoo Kim states that this book is a sequel to *Makers of Modern Korean Buddhism*, published in 2010. That book has served as a foundational work for many scholars, like me, who began their academic study of modern Korean Buddhism in the last decade. I believe this new work can serve the same purpose for the next generation of scholars, while also being a must-read for senior scholars in the field. Wonderfully detailed but still accessible, it covers a broad range of topics, importantly building off, and occasionally overcoming, the themes of “colonialism, nationalism, and modernity” that have dominated scholarship on modern Korean Buddhism. Turning their focus to “contemporary religious practice, gender issues, ethical concerns about clerical marriage and scandals, and engagement with secular society,” the authors’ works reflect the changing dynamics of the field. Indeed, many of the authors have also published their own seminal books in the field in recent years.

In Part I, Jin Y. Park and Mark A. Nathan look at two important figures in modern Korean Buddhism: Hyeam Sŏnggwan [Hyeam Seonggwan] (1920–2001) and Paek Yongsŏng [Baek Yongseong] (1864–1940). Hyeam is a “relatively unknown figure in English-language scholarship,” but his life and teachings reflect both the institutional and philosophical changes in Korean Buddhism during the twentieth century. Park attempts to relate Hyeam’s core Zen Buddhist beliefs, such as “freedom” and “doubt,” as well as his steadfast *hwadu* meditation practice, to the lives of ordinary laypeople. Although Park’s

chapter occasionally reads like a dharma talk in which she interprets Korean Zen concepts for a lay audience, her emphasis on understanding Hyeam's "personal philosophy," without judging it based on existing frameworks (nationalism, modernization, etc.), is the key takeaway. Nathan's chapter looks at Paek Yongsŏng in a similar vein. Moving beyond the nationalist/collaborator binary that has dominated studies on Paek, Nathan centers Paek's propagation work and his unrelenting drive to bring Korean Buddhism to lay audiences. Nathan compellingly evaluates religion as a network of individuals comprised of small and large-scale "systems" in order to deconstruct longstanding tropes and grand narratives in the study of modern Korean Buddhism.

In part II, Hwansoo Kim and Eunsu Cho contribute to the burgeoning academic discourse on women in Korean Buddhism. They center the lives of Lady Ch'ŏn [Jeon] (1848–1934?) and nun Chŏng Suok [Jeong Suok] (1902–1966). These chapters are women's histories; they highlight important women's stories that have previously been muted in the male-centered telling of modern Korean Buddhism's history. Kim shows how Lady Ch'ŏn is representative of the many former Yi Royal Household court ladies who had an outsized impact on Korean Buddhism. From reading Kim's chapter, I am convinced that much more research needs to be done on the relationship between court ladies and Buddhism in the late Chosŏn [Joseon] and Japanese colonial periods.

The issue of clerical celibacy has always been connected to Japanese influence on colonized Korean Buddhism and often judged strictly through the nationalist/collaborator lens. In part III, however, Jeongeun Park and Su Jung Kim take a different tack, tracing the history of clerical marriage from late Chosŏn-period monastic regulations to contemporary public debates. Park explains how Korean and Japanese Buddhists, as well as the colonial Japanese government, created the oxymoronic "married *bhikṣu*" status of Korean monks, reflecting "weakness" in Chosŏn Buddhism's "ordination tradition" and the colonial government's strong influence on monastic rules. Like many of the best recent works on late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Korean Buddhism, Park's chapter shows how all parties involved in the clerical marriage issue had agency and approached it from a diverse range of perspectives. Kim's insights into the "secret wife" and monastic scandals reveal some of the most pressing issues in contemporary Korean Buddhism. Though Kim left something to be desired in her discussion of "public secrecy" and public perceptions of clerical orthodoxy/orthopraxy, her non-polemical approach is enviable and a breath of fresh air in the discourse on contemporary monasticism.

In the final chapter of part III, Uri Kaplan broadens the scope by discussing debates on and formulations of monastic regulations in the modern Chogyŏ

[Jogye] Order. Kaplan's premise and argument are quite simple: the Chogye Order is very practical in its changes to monastic rules, reacting to wider social changes and pressing issues in the order. Kaplan reminds us that this is how the Vinaya has always been conceived; in ancient India, Vinaya rules were most likely written incrementally in reaction to social or monastic problems.

The first two chapters in part IV I believe, show some of the difficulties of challenging narratives of nationalism and colonialism in early twentieth-century Korean Buddhism. Both chapters make important points on the vast array of influences and perspectives expressed by key figures in the "commercial publication industry" and scholarly community in the colonial period. However, each chapter's lack of a strong, centralized argument makes them feel disjointed at times, and the reader gets lost in arcane discussions without clear purpose. Of course, not all figures should be examined strictly through a framework of nationalism or colonialism; but, as Mark A. Nathan points out in his above chapter, broader narratives can be key to historical inquiry and help us make sense of seemingly disordered phenomena. Chapters 8 and 9 could have benefitted from a narrower focus and a broader focus, respectively, to make clearer what exactly the topics covered mean for the field of modern Korean Buddhist studies.

In chapter 10, Florence Galmiche explores the differing roles of urban temples and mountain monasteries through the "tension" between "massification of the audience and valorization of the monastic ideal." The Chogye Order has centered on the laity and prioritized monks' ability to teach to meet the needs of modern people, without compromising the goal of making these people "true Buddhists." Monks have struggled with their pedagogic skills, however, which, Galmiche says, leads to possible "illegibility" for laypeople. In other words, there are seemingly contradictions in the order's push for practicality and its concurrent emphasis on traditional monasticism. Balancing "tensions" and eschewing "illegibility" are key for the order moving forward.

Overall, I would recommend this book to anyone in the field of Korean Buddhist studies. Every scholar can find their niche within these chapters. Whether this book inspires a new scholar in the field or becomes a key reference for a senior scholar, it pushes Korean Buddhist studies into the future with fresh insights and groundbreaking ideas.

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