
Over the last few years a growing number of books on Korean Buddhism in English have appeared, affording people who do not know Korean or who have difficulty with the specialized terminology of the field to learn more about this subject. Sem Vermeersch’s *The Power of the Buddhas: The Politics of Buddhism During the Koryo Dynasty*, with its focus on how Buddhism interacted with the Koryo state and society is a welcome addition; introducing important debates on Korean Buddhism to an English-reading audience and making advances in the field in its own right.

Vermeersch’s stated goal is to examine how Buddhist institutions and worldviews interacted with the state, pointing out in his introduction that while work has been done in this area, there has not yet been a comprehensive treatment of this subject matter in all its intricacies (3-4). In particular, Vermeersch is interested in critically examining the categorization of Koryo Buddhism as “State-Protection” (*hoguk*) Buddhism. Vermeersch argues persuasively that such a characterization of Koryo Buddhism describes only a single part of its complex reality and that a deeper understanding of the relationship between the Koryo state and Buddhism is needed.

To make his case, Vermeersch clearly explains and skillfully deploys the theoretical language of such scholars as Max Weber, Pierre Bourdieu, and Howard Wechler, carefully weaving theory and historical data and analysis together into a seamless whole. Vermeersch’s work covers a hefty three-hundred and seventy-two pages, his argument spanning over seven chapters in three sections. His first section “Historical and Ideological Background,” consists of two chapters, one of which examines the relationship between Buddhism and the state in Late Silla, in order to provide the background information necessary to understand the development of Koryo Buddhism, and another which focuses on the “Ten Injunctions” of King T’aeto, using them to delineate the foundations of Koryo Buddhism’s relationship with the state. The second section consists of three chapters, the first, entitled “Legal Provisions on the Status of Monks,” examines how monks were treated in Koryo’s legal codes and shows that while the state might have sought to keep the sangha pure and corrupt, it often was unable, or unwilling, to enforce provisions calling for the punishment of malevolent monks. The second chapter of this section focuses on the monk examination system, showing that the temples themselves possessed a great deal of power in determining how the exams were administered. The final chapter explores the roles of royal and state preceptors, clearly delineating the functions of these two positions and describing their role in Koryo Buddhism.

Part three “The Ritual and Economic Roles of Buddhism,” consists of two chapters. In the first, which focuses on the Buddhist temple economy, Vermeersch shows that despite state attempts to the contrary, Buddhist temples managed to acquire control over an increasing amount of land. In the second chapter, Vermeersch takes state-sponsored rituals as his subject, arguing persuasively for the multidimensional
quality of these rituals and the relationship between the Buddhist religious specialists who performed them and the state which supported them.

Following Veermersch's conclusion is a catalogue of all Korean monks active in Koryō on whom biographical information can be found. This collection should prove of use to further research in the future, which is appropriate since *The Power of the Buddhas* is intended not so much to be the final word on the relationship between Buddhism and the state in Koryō but as a spur to, and foundation for, further work (26-27). The seven chapters, conclusion, and appendix that make up *The Power of the Buddhas* are all well written, and considering the density and difficulty of the issues that Vermeersch is grappling with, easy to read. Each chapter could be read with profit on its own as a stand-alone examination of the topic it treats. At the same time, they are skillfully brought together to make Vermeersch's argument.

Vermeersch states that in Koryō, just as in all pre-modern societies, religion and power were closely linked together. However, the relationship between the Koryō government and Buddhism was not a case of the state simply using religion. Korean Buddhists (that is, the religious specialists who practiced Buddhism full-time, performed its rituals, and managed its temples and lands) willingly accepted the discipline of the state, receiving the power, prestige, and economic benefits this relationship brought. This was not however, a simple *quid pro quo* or manipulation of religious sentiments. Rather, Koryō monks, government officials, and kings all shared a similar worldview and understanding of the meaning of life that was deeply influenced by Buddhism, acting as a foundation on which the close relationship between Buddhism and the state could be built. Shared belief in a worldview centered on a Buddhism that interacted with, absorbed, and shaped elements of other schools of thought, such as Confucianism and geomancy undergirded the relationship between Buddhism and the state and shaped the religion's economic, political, and social life. Thus, Vermeersch, through his careful exploration of the relationship between Buddhism and the state, provides us with a good sense of how elites in the Koryō dynasty understood reality. Moreover, through his meticulous research he is able to show a key difference between Buddhism as it existed in Korea and Buddhism as it existed in China, writing that, “[R]ather than a foreign religion tolerated but also kept at arm's length by the state as had been the case in China since the founding of the Tang, Buddhism in Koryō operated as an integral part of the dynastic system, which underpinned the legitimacy claims of the ruling house.” (372).

Despite its overall excellence, there are a few problems with *The Power of the Buddhas*. The most serious one, in my view, is that while he includes references to other periods, Vermeersch's focus is on the first century of the Koryō dynasty. There is a logic to this, as Vermeersch points out, since that is when the foundations of Koryō Buddhism were laid (26-27). However, in Vermeersch's chapter on Silla Buddhism, he argues that its categorization as “state-protection” Buddhism is flawed because such a label takes something that was characteristic of Silla Buddhism at its foundation and carries it through to the fall of the kingdom despite the fact that Buddhism developed beyond the role this label imputes to it (44-45). But since Vermeersch focuses mostly on the first century of Koryō, he might have made errors
similar to those about the categorization of Silla Buddhism. I wonder then if more could have been said about the Buddhist risings that took place during the period of military rule and what influence the rise of the Yuan dynasty had on the relationship between Buddhism and the state in Koryō.

Furthermore, Vermeersch ends his book describing the closer connection between the “dynastic system” in Koryo Korea than in China. However, it was developments in late Koryo that helped lead to the dismal situation of Buddhism during the Choson dynasty. It might have been appropriate for Vermeersch to comment more on how Buddhism went from enjoying a more-privileged position in Korea than China to a less-privileged one. However, in defense of Vermeersch, a fuller treatment would have added several chapters to an already impressive book and that his work is not meant as an end, but as a point of departure for more research.

There is one more issue that promises to be an interesting point of debate. In The Power of the Buddhas, Vermeersch accepts Taejo’s “Ten Injunctions” as authentic. Though he makes mention of the research of Remco Breuker, who has challenged their authenticity, Breuker’s full argument was unavailable to Vermeersch at the time of the writing of his book and so he was not able to engage with it extensively. However, in October of 2009, Breuker’s contention that the “Ten Injunctions” was actually a forgery produced during the reign of Hyonjong (r. 1009-1031), will appear in a special issue of the journal East Asian History, published by the Australian National University of Canberra. It will be interesting to see how Breuker’s contentions will affect Vermeersch’s own arguments, though I believe that Vermeersch’s major points will still hold true.

In conclusion, I would highly recommend Sem Vermeersch’s Power of the Buddhas. Vermeersch’s solid research and penetrating analysis has produced a book which takes a daunting amount of material and distills it into a straight-forward argument that should be easily understood even by those who are not overly familiar with Korean Buddhism while at the same time remaining thought provoking for the Buddhist scholar. Anyone who has an interest in Korean history or religion, or simply in the relationship between religion and the state, will find reading this book to be a profitable, worthwhile, and enjoyable experience.

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BOOK REVIEW


In his highly engaging examination of the two Koreas since 1989, Hyung Gu Lynn, currently the Chair in Korean Research at the Institute of Asian Research at the University of British Columbia, provides the reader an original perspective into the dual realities of the Korean peninsula. Taking as a starting point the two established states that both constitute a version of “Korea,” he attempts to trace the historical, economic, and social dynamics at work on the peninsula since 1989, dynamics that have resulted in the obdurate political division of the ostensibly single Korean people. Further, the author also endeavors to address a patent shortcoming of past studies, that is, the language barrier.

Illustrative of the fact that the Korean peninsula does not easily conform to Cold War notions of division, the author begins his history of the peninsula in 1989, the year that brought down the Iron Curtain, reunited Germany and gave rise to the notion of the “end of history.” Curiously, such millenarian histrionics had little if any resonance in Korea. By 1989 the realities of Korean division had taken on a permanence equal to the winds of change blowing elsewhere, a permanence stouter even than the hurricane gales that buffeted the North Korean state after the death of Kim Il Sung and through the epic famines of the 1990s. It is this persistent “anomaly” of Korea, Lynn believes, that makes “the post-1989 histories of the two Koreas... important within the context of the global history of the present”(4).

*Bipolar Orders* is organized into five chapters. The first four are an attempt to trace the polarization process that has led to the current reality of a distinctive North and South Korea, distinctive not only two-dimensionally as separate political states, but as two functioning versions of the present. While chapters one and two deal with the democratization and economic changes in South Korea, chapters three and four treat the political and economic history of North Korea. The final chapter examines what the author terms “the decussation effects” of more recent years, that is, the seemingly paradoxical phenomena of an improvement in North-South relations and the concomitant rise in anti-American sentiment in South Korea even as it became democratized and robustly capitalistic and North Korea shifted to a more confrontational “military first” politics while pursuing its nuclear ambitions.

Though ostensibly a history of the peninsula since 1989, it naturally cannot be held to such strict chronological restraints and when necessary the author does take the story back further (for instance to the economic policies of Park Chung Hee when examining the economic transformation of South Korea). Here and throughout the book the author is fond of quantifying phenomena into set numbers of causes. For instance, there are four factors behind the 1987 democratization in South Korea, four thematic reactions to the “Korean wave” (*Hallyu*), eight labels traditionally applied to North Korea, etc. To be sure, such an analytical approach is greatly helpful in conceptualizing the many changes that have affected the Korean states over the last six decades, but at times it makes the reader suspect the author is trapped in a
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quantifying mindset. Nevertheless, the chapters on South Korea are equal to the task in telling in a succinct yet articulate manner the emergence of political pluralism and rampant capitalism in South Korea.

In his examination of North Korea, Lynn is determined to steer clear of the tendency of many past treatments, which have too often depicted the North, and Kim Chong-il in particular, as either irrational or supremely rational and cunning. Here again the author also falls into a pattern of categorizing, in this case of delineating the “eight labels” traditionally applied to North Korea. To these he adds his own suggestion, that of a “holy trinity” to describe the North Korean regime. Lynn takes pains to emphasize that nothing “divine” is implied by the term, rather it refers to the trinity of Kim father, Kim son, and Juche ideology as the driving forces of the North Korean socio-political system. To take this “non-religious” metaphor further still, he likens the North Korean party and military elite to the “apostles.”

The author also expounds briefly on the nature of the Juche ideology. In this Lynn perhaps says nothing explicitly new, but he does explain the fundamental nature of Juche ideology in a succinct and eloquent way. In Chapter Four Lynn then offers some nuance to the often misunderstood economic system of North Korea, describing the state’s “four economies” that allow for an outwardly socialist system while at the same time providing for the luxury needs of the elite and financing the country's nuclear and weapons programs. Here also the author provides an informed discussion of the 1990s famine, offering up his summation of the famine’s varied causes and placing ultimate blame on the state’s entitlement system that privileged the elite as well as on the ineptitudes of a regimented economy.

All Koreans are largely adamant in their belief that they share a 5000 year history, culture, and language. It is in fact what defines the Korean race—minjok. This long-evolving national identity, strengthened by the bitter experience of colonization, occupation, and division, has since 1945 served as a key tool in the rhetoric of legitimization of both North and South. In other words, if Korea is one nation the question is only which government legitimately represents the minjok. And yet one may debate how much this issue still informs the politics and agendas of the two Koreas. With the emergence of a democratic and prosperous South Korea and the growing disparity between it and North Korea, unification is an increasingly daunting prospect to people in the South and increasingly a pipe dream to the regime in the North. The trope of the minjok has lost much of its luster and power to beguile.

Though he never states so explicitly, reading Bipolar Orders one soon gets the impression that the author is out to deconstruct this notion of “one Korea.” The very title of the book implies as much. Depending upon one’s point of view, one is accustomed to consider the North-South Korean division as unnatural—either “the Cold War’s last divide” (as the author quotes Bill Clinton) or (to many Koreans) as an often quite literal familial division. But Professor Lynn argues here that though unfortunate and tragic, it is not necessarily “unnatural” and therefore there is little reason to consider reunification as something inevitable. After sixty-odd years of division the two states of North and South Korea have evolved beyond ideology and mutual foil to become two distinct realities. The oft-perceived disorder of a divided Korea is in fact an order—firmly established and with each side driven by its own
unique contingencies, and just possibly here to stay. Or in the author’s words, “[Korean] division is not just an anomalous vestige of the Cold War, but a functioning system, a bipolar order” (174). The author also cast a critical eye the idea of “Koreanness,” be it something perceived by Koreans of themselves or by the outsider of Koreans. One could take issue with some of the author’s assertions. For instance, it is arguably an overstatement to claim “South Korea was a multietnic country at its inception in 1948” (83), based upon a few thousand marriages between Korean and Japanese.

At 176 pages (not including notes and index), *Bipolar Orders* is a slender volume that precludes itself from any detailed examination of the history or socio-political realities of the two Koreas. If there is any weakness in this volume it is the author’s failure at times to draw his own conclusions rather than to delineate those of others. He often contents himself with dismissing various contending theories or schools of thought wish a “whatever the case...” or “in any case...” To be fair, the author does state that his intention here is only to present a survey of the period and to summarize the primary arguments issuing from scholars in both Asia and the West. It is the complexity of the realities on the peninsula rather than their causes that interest him. But considering the intellectual rigor of the work as a whole, the reader hopes in vain to hear more of the author’s views. For instance, Lynn notes the singular survival of the North Korean regime even as other similar authoritarian regimes fell. The author also remarks on the nature of Juche ideology as “one that acknowledges the role of the human being... unlike Marxism” (105). Yet he makes no connection between this characteristic of North Korean state ideology and the persistence of the North Korean state and its system. Has this “human element” guaranteed the regime the popular loyalty that has ensured its pugnacious survival? To take one more point, he discusses in Chapter Five the “decussion” phenomena, which describes the apparent paradox of the two Koreas growing ever more disparate and yet experiencing a rapprochement at the expense of the South Korea-USA relationship. Yet is there anything really unnatural about an increasingly democratic South Korea questioning its relationship with the United States? In short, here too further analysis of this effect would be helpful to grasping the various dynamics at play on the post-1989 peninsula. In any case, such issues do ensure that this text has plenty of fodder for academic debates and graduate seminars to come.

It is indeed high time for a book examining what the author terms the North-South diptych to recognize a now undeniable shift in mentalité on both sides. It’s not simply that the scenario of reunification is either so daunting or implausible that it is dismissed or relegated to some future generation, but that it is increasingly seen as something unnecessary. As the author suggests, “amidst South Korea’s accelerated changes... clinging to the myth of a single ‘pure’ race of Koreans in a single nation-state is not a feasible vision for the future”(90). In proposing the powerful – and what will be to many a downright treacherous – notion that there is nothing inevitable about Korean unification *Bipolar Orders* opens a new chapter in the intellectual examination of the two Koreas.

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