

BOOK REVIEW

Hwansoo Ilmee KIM. *The Korean Buddhist Empire: A Transnational History (1910–1945)*. Cambridge (Massachusetts) and London: Harvard University Asia Center, 2018. 358 pages. ISBN-10: 9780674987197 (Hardcover). US\$ 45/ £36.95/ €40.50.

Kim's *Korean Buddhist Empire* extends the scope of his *Empire of the Dharma* (Harvard University Asia Center, 2012) to show how the Korean Buddhist institution sought to remake itself by working with and against the Japanese during the colonial era. In this sense, Korean Buddhists grafted their own needs and ambitions onto Japan's empire in order to strengthen Buddhism in Korea and beyond. Notwithstanding internal tensions and rivalries, what is most remarkable is the degree to which there was a shared vision of a revived Korean Buddhism in a worldwide context.

Framed through the concepts of transnationalism, nationalism, governmentality, and propagation (5–24), the book begins and concludes with a fascinating discussion of Toh Chinho (1889–1979?). Due to his age, this “progressive Korean nationalist monk” (1) was in a perfect position to participate in modernizing, outward-looking efforts on behalf of Korean Buddhism and thus illustrate the key concepts that run through the study. There was, however, another critical element to Toh's life and career, one that recurs through the work: religious competition among Korean Buddhists, between Korean and Japanese Buddhists, and between Buddhism and other religions, principally Christianity. Toh converted to Christianity in the 1960s when he fell ill, and “became a member of the Full Methodist Korean Church in Honolulu and died a Christian” (299).

Chapter One, “The Valorization of the Koryō Canon,” focuses on the Japanese-Korean tension over this massive collection of Buddhist scriptures. It was not a good sign when, in the months leading up to Japan's annexation of Korea in 1910, a Japanese journalist and government employee announced that he had “rediscovered” the woodblocks of the Koryō Canon in storage at Haein Temple” (33). This audacious claim managed to turn “the Koryō Canon . . . into powerful symbolic capital for both Japanese and Korean nationalists.” The Japanese saw possession of the canon as a symbol of “their uncontested control over Korea,” while Koreans saw it as “a tangible embodiment of their nation” (35). The history of the canon, originally carved to repulse foreign invaders in the eleventh century, was being replayed, if slightly updated for the twentieth century.

Chapter Two, “A Buddhist Christmas,” charts the chain of international influences on Korean Buddhist modernization through a detailed analysis of the Buddha's Birthday Festival, which was imported from Japan and can be traced back to the Sri Lankan Buddhist reform/modernization movement from the mid-nineteenth century. Kim's central point, illustrated throughout, is that this festival—and thus Korean Buddhist modernization more broadly—“cannot be understood without taking into account the pan-Asian and transnational Buddhist

discourse of the period” and the need Buddhists felt to respond to the challenge of “Christian missionaries and European imperialism” (69–70). Seen in this light, cooperation between Japanese and Korean Buddhists makes much more sense. Or put another way, the longstanding historiographical binary of collaboration with/ resistance to the Japanese appears as an *ex post facto* imposition on a much more interesting historical reality in which Buddhists “felt an urgent call to reenergize the apathetic, traditional Buddhism of the premodern era . . . to survive during a time of massive social and political upheaval” (102).

But there was also danger in religious convictions as seen in Chapter Three, “The Transnational Buddhist Yu Guanbin.” Kim begins this chapter with the 1933 assassination in Shanghai of Yu, an ethnic Chinese Korean, who was a wealthy businessman, lay Buddhist, and the man who bankrolled the Chinese Buddhist reform movement of Taixu (1890–1947). With that much information, those with a cynical bent of mind might not be especially surprised over Yu’s fate. But the fascination is in the details. Yu grew up as a Christian, briefly converted to Islam, and then finally found Buddhism which, he concluded, “was superior to other religions, especially Christianity” (122). But Yu was not the type to eschew worldly entanglements. He was a tremendously ambitious transnational man, “juggling . . . multiple identities and affiliations,” in an increasingly national-oriented world (129). Kim convincingly concludes that Yu was crushed in a collision between nationalism and transnationalism. Apart from a “sensitivity to criticism that led him to lash out and alienate others,” there was also the financial angle that was tinged, it seems, with envy over his success (136): “Yu’s full-on involvement with Taixu’s Buddhist movement led to the exclusion of support for Korean nationalists.” In the choice between Korean nationalism and Buddhist transnationalism, Yu chose the latter and died for it.

Chapter Four, “Transcultural Zen: Sōma Shōhei’s Training with Korean Masters,” focuses on the monastic setting through the experiences of a Japanese priest, Sōma Shōhei (1904–1971), whose accounts of his study with Korean monks led some prominent Japanese to reconsider their condescending views on Korean Buddhism. The central assumption at the outset was that Korean Buddhism needed to undergo a process of “socialization” (*shakaika*) in order to cultivate “sociability” (*shakōsei*) and thus become more like Japanese Buddhism (177). In practice, this idea implied married clerics integrated with the laity in urban environments. But the proponents of “socialization” were not necessarily enamored with the idea of married clerics, either Japanese or Korean. Sōma’s accounts of his training offered a vision of a vigorous monastic tradition which appealed to some Japanese as the embodiment of real Buddhism—an idea that turned the socialization/sociability thesis on its head. In this revised analysis, only monks who had remained in secluded monasteries—effectively rejecting the push for socialization—represented hope for Korean Buddhism’s future. There was, however, another element of “sociability” that showed up in Sōma’s writings: the responsiveness of otherwise diligent Korean Sōn/Zen monks to the needs of patrons (161–163).

This issue would have benefitted from lengthier treatment, largely because it is linked to the subject of the last chapter, “Propagation in Colonial Korea, Japan,

and Manchuria.” Were those monks who interrupted their training to perform a ritual for a donor merely securing their own livelihoods? Or were they exercising compassion for the worries of the laity and perhaps propagating Buddhism, as well? Self-interest, compassion, and propagation are not mutually exclusive, and the Korean monks Sōma encountered were truly likeable; their mutual respect and warmth as fellow practitioners is moving. But it is difficult to ignore that the ritual function performed in the monastery was in tension with the push to modernize Buddhism and secure its future; in almost perfect contrast, those who wished to modernize Buddhism seem to have been more concerned with what they thought the laity needed and less with what the laity wanted.

Chapter Five, “Governmentality: The Great Head Temple,” examines the relationship between secular and religious authority, bringing into sharp focus how Korean Buddhists worked to pursue their own interests. Despite assumptions in nationalist scholarship, the interests of Korean Buddhists and the Japanese colonial government were not necessarily in irreconcilable conflict. On the contrary, each endeavored to benefit from the other as much as possible, and their mutual benefit was especially well illustrated in the mid- to late 1930s. As part of the crackdown on “pseudo-” or “superstitious” religions, the Japanese colonial government seized the buildings belonging to one of the new “superstitious” religions, Poch’ŏn’gyo, after its leader died—and stayed dead. In the absence of the heavenly kingdom (or, well, something like it) that he had promised, his followers found themselves under financial stress. The government struck, seizing Poch’ŏn’gyo’s properties to settle its debts. It was a fire sale, and Korean Buddhism reaped a double benefit: it “was able to accomplish its long-desired dream as the state made an all-out effort to eradicate all new, ‘superstitious’ religions. Not only did this reduce the competition for Korean Buddhism, but it also inadvertently led to a huge gift: once the new religion Poch’ŏn’gyo was abolished, its massive, beautifully constructed central building was sold, at a bargain price, to Korean Buddhists. The building was subsequently disassembled, transported, and reassembled in Seoul, reborn as an authentic, traditional Korean Buddhist temple and the new headquarters for Korean Buddhism” (186).

Chapter Six assesses a crucial component in Buddhist modernization: “propagation (or missionization),” by which Buddhists emulated Christians in attempting to spread their message (231). On the domestic front, it is also reasonable to see propagation more or less as education, by which the Buddhist laity were to be properly trained to understand their own religion. In this respect, propagation was a response to religious competition that grew out of changing political and social circumstances. Seen in the worldwide context, European imperialism was a critical factor in the spread of Christianity. But in colonial Korea, European imperialism was not the principal issue; Japanese imperialism was, and Japan was eager to promote Buddhism. The net result was that Korean Buddhists and the Japanese shared a common interest illustrated perhaps most graphically in the history of the Great Head Temple as recounted in Chapter Five. But there was another dimension to the question of propagation since Korea was part of the Japanese empire. It is here that the conceptual link between this work

and the *Empire of the Dharma* can be seen most clearly. Working with and through the colonial/imperial state, Koreans sought to cross national lines to create their own Korean Buddhist empire, even as they sought to reinforce Korean Buddhism's position against rival religions within Korea itself.

Kim's "Conclusion" is no simple wrap-up. It is, instead, a nuanced elaboration of the key themes developed throughout this fascinating book. This allows him to make uncomfortable points on the history of Korean Buddhism. Among others, he notes that failed efforts to establish Korean Buddhist missionary work since the end of colonial rule suggest that Korean Buddhism "might have been confined by its own innate limitations rather than being entirely shackled, oppressed, or made stagnant by colonialism" (294). Whether intentional or not, the effect is the same: one is left with a sense of *déjà vu* upon seeing the words "oppressed" and "stagnant" in this context. After all, weren't these the judgments applied to Chosŏn-dynasty Buddhism by the Japanese who, in pursuit of their "empire of the dharma," were eager to emphasize their role in rectifying the Chosŏn dynasty's anti-Buddhist policies?

Yet as Kim shows throughout the work, Buddhism in the colonial period was far from stagnant, nor was it oppressed in the way "pseudo-religions" were. Indeed, Buddhism was, in fact, a beneficiary of such oppression, and moreover, the Japanese colonial period reaffirmed the fundamental idea among Buddhists that "their religion depended on the state" (284). This outstanding study shows why Korean Buddhism is worth hard consideration, not only in relation to the state structures in the premodern and modern colonial and post-colonial eras, but also in relation to the history of Buddhism in East Asia.

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