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Representing Korean Buddhism: *Toward a Transnational Understanding of the Field of Korean Buddhist Studies*

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Abstract

At first glance, it seems that the relation between the study of Korean Buddhism within Korea and outside it can be characterized by the metaphor of osmosis: while Korean research freely travels to other academic communities that cite, critique, or otherwise engage it, Western scholarship on Korean Buddhism rarely receives any mention in Korean scholarship. Differing research agendas, linguistic barriers, and cultural assumptions can be identified as stumbling blocks, together with incompatible terminology. However, looking at the bigger picture, it is unmistakable that research agendas are growing increasingly closer. This article will attempt to briefly chart the intertwined histories of academic research on Korean Buddhism in Korea and in the West, identify the hurdles to meaningful exchange in both directions, and formulate some strategies for closing the gaps that separate academic communities.

Keywords: Korean Buddhism, Buddhist studies, study of Korean Buddhism in South Korea, study of Korean Buddhism in the West, intercultural communication

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Introduction

The March 2006 issue of the *Review of Korean Studies* (vol. 9, no. 1) was a theme issue on the state of Korean Buddhist studies, focusing on the United States, Japan, and Korea; this was followed the year after by an overview of the study of Korean Buddhism in Europe (Sorensen 2007) in the *Korea Journal*. These articles served as the first *stocktaking* of the field, and may be seen as evidence of a field reaching maturity. They listed virtually all research that had been published in English on Korean Buddhism,[1] and thereby served to maintain the impression that Korean Buddhism exists as a *discipline* in the US and Europe. However, a closer look reveals that the number of scholars who actually specialize in this field is in reality almost insignificant.[2]

The number of North American or European scholars who have built a body of research based primarily on Korean Buddhism is probably less than ten, and therefore it is hardly worth comparing with studies on Korean Buddhism within South Korea, where hundreds of graduate students, scholars, and scholar-monks are active in the field. Yet given that English is the dominant language of global academia, the small number of Western researchers therefore have a disproportionally large voice in the global market. This is undoubtedly a point of frustration for the Buddhist community in South Korea (hereafter 'Korea'), and is probably one of the key reasons for undertaking ambitious translation projects of Korean Buddhist sources, for example the *Collected Works of Korean Buddhism* (2012).

Yet each academic area has its own agendas and approaches, making the act of translation a potential minefield. The driving force behind the

1. Although in terms of quantity the number of publications in languages other than English is arguably negligible, it is important to add that other languages have also produced important results; it is mainly due to logistical constraints that these are not reflected here.
2. Moreover, there are almost no positions specifically designated for Korean Buddhism: Columbia University's Il Hwan and Soon Ja Cho Professorship of Korean Culture and Religions is one of the few that favors Korean Buddhism; Robert Buswell obtained a position in Chinese Buddhism. See Suah Kim (2013, 169).

Collected Works of Korean Buddhism, Ven. Jigwan (then president of the Jogye Order), was fond of quoting the example of the great Chinese translation bureaus of the Tang dynasty,[3] ignoring the fact that these bureaus operated within China, translating Indian texts into Chinese for a Chinese audience. The rush to publish translations like these, often propelled by the misguided assumption that they will stimulate further research, may well have the opposite effect, since the project was not driven by what we can call the "target community." But at the same this example serves to illustrate the breakdown of disparate geographic fields of research, and their increasing interwovenness.

This article therefore intends to map the changing dynamic between English-language studies on Korean Buddhism and Korean-language studies. It is not intended to be a systematic comparison, nor is it intended to evaluate the methodologies or approaches of either side. Some criticism will naturally be included, and here and there inevitably some generalizations will be made on "Western-based studies" and "Korean-based studies," but the ultimate goal is to show that inevitably both sides are much more similar than they often want to admit, and moreover, the differences in academic style that did exist are eroding. At the same time, just as in the case of the Buddhist translation project mentioned above, cooperation and exchange does not always proceed as intended, so I also hope that this article can serve to resolve such issues.

Ideally, I should have analyzed systematically how Western researchers cite Korean research and how they represent the results of their Korean colleagues. Parallel to that, I should also have investigated the main currents in Korean Buddhist studies, and infer their connection to global trends in spite of the absence of many direct references to Western research. However, the amount of research output has increased exponentially, making it impossible to be comprehensive. I have therefore relied mainly on the research that I gathered over the past 20-plus years, augmented by searches on academic databases. Fortunately, the differences in the field have always intrigued me, allowing me to write this article from experience as it

3. See page 3 in the preface to each volume of the Collected Works of Korean Buddhism.

were. This of course carries the drawback that it reflects especially my own interests, since the research articles and books I draw on are the ones that have attracted my attention and which I therefore took the time to read. Thus, although based on searches in databases and taking into account some of the quantitative results they yield, the article takes a qualitative approach, based on a careful reading of a wide variety of voices, while also trying to take into account my own position.

This article is divided into four sections, which have a loosely organic connection, but really attempt to look at the problem from different angles. The first section deals with the study of Korean Buddhism in the West. It is not so much an attempt at sketching its history, as an endeavor at understanding its proclivities: what is it in Korean Buddhism that researchers are drawn too, how do they study Korean Buddhism, and how does their study relate to research in the Korean language? The second section then shifts the focus to Buddhist studies in Korea, mainly regarding its position vis-à-vis global Buddhology. Given the vast number of publications and the diversity of specialists, here per force the perspective is more synoptic and tentative, and will probably fail to avoid some generalizations. The key here is to try and explain the apparent ignorance of global (read: Anglophone) research on Buddhism. The third section will focus on a key factor, namely the non-matching terminology. While East Asian Buddhist countries share a common vocabulary, one of the biggest challenges in Western Buddhist studies is finding suitable English equivalents for the key concepts. Finally, the last section will look into the reshaping of the field of humanities at the beginning of the 21st century, and how that impacts Korean Buddhism studies both in Korea and the West.

The Study of Korean Buddhism in the West: Flows and Counterflows

The roots of Western interest in Buddhism are diverse; the initial contacts were steeped in colonialism and Christian proselytization, to name but a few factors. But the great efflorescence of Buddhist studies after World War II was surely due to the fact that Buddhism, notably Zen Buddhism, had

become a source of fascination; many saw in Buddhism a way to save the world from materialism and self-destructive egoism, and many of those who pursued the Buddhist path later became scholars (some after their initial dreams had floundered in the face of reality).[4] Inspirational figures from the proverbial East, such as D. T. Suzuki, played a pivotal role in this, although naturally Orientalist perceptions were an undercurrent as well. Korea, lacking such seminal figures, lagged somewhat behind, but documentary and anecdotal evidence suggests that some Westerners did find their way to Korea too from the 1970s onward,[5] perhaps trailing off from other more well-trodden paths that led to enlightened gurus in India, Thailand, or Japan.

While this produced a few English-language translations of sermons of Korean Buddhist masters (e.g., Ku San [1976]), in how far it inspired academic studies of Korean Buddhism is difficult to say. At least it helped to produce the first great scholar of Korean Buddhism, Robert E. Buswell Jr., who studied with Gusan seunim at Songgwang-sa from 1970 to 1975. Buswell is without doubt a pioneer of the field, who almost singlehandedly put Korean Buddhism on the Western academic map (Suah Kim 2013). Yet after exchanging the monastic for the academic world, his research was additionally shaped by the Western tradition of Buddhist studies; in particular, that of Chinese Buddhism. Here it is also important to mention the pioneering role of Western scholars who started out studying Chinese Buddhism or other traditions, and later took an interest in Korean Buddhism. Notably Lewis Lancaster[6] and David Chappell should be mentioned here; although there is always the danger that such scholars

4. Hence John McRae's fourth rule of Zen studies: "Romanticism Breeds Cynicism" (McRae 2003, xx).
5. See Buswell (1992, 20): according to Buswell, during the fourteen years that Gusan was Seon master at Songgwang-sa (1969–1983), some fifty foreigners came to study under him. At the same time, Korean monks like Seungsahn started proselytizing in the West, while Koreans had produced PhD dissertations in the United States already in the 1960s (see Suah Kim [2016, 329]). However, since these streams do not seem to have had a major impact on Western Buddhist studies, I have not treated them here.
6. See Suah Kim (2016, 330). In the discussion of people influencing Lancaster, probably Michael Rogers is meant rather than Michael Robinson.

would treat Korean Buddhism as simply an extension of Chinese or other forms of Buddhism, it has to be said that these scholars in particular, though not having written much on Korean Buddhism, produced excellent studies that have withstood the test of time and thereby inspired others to take Korean Buddhism seriously.

Thus, the initial Western forays into the study of Korean Buddhism were mainly shaped by what Richard McBride (2008) has called the tradition of "high textual scholarship": in other words, the study of the *important texts* of the tradition. This is based on the assumption that the tradition flows from the brightest minds, who have shaped it through their erudition and enlightened others through their works, hence the focus on seminal figures such as Wonhyo (617–686) or Jinul (1158–1210), and later also on Joseon masters such as Hyujeong (1520–1604) or Baekpa Geungseong (1767–1852). As is well known, many scholars of religion have taken issue with such overriding concern with texts, pointing out that as living traditions, religions shape texts as much as the other way round. This is certainly a valid point, which will be taken up in the fourth section, but at the same time it is undeniable that the study of Korean Buddhist texts can help to lay the basis for a deeper understanding of Korean Buddhism. However, as this aspect of Western Buddhist scholarship has already been adequately covered (see McBride [2006; 2008], Sorensen [2007]), in this section I will try to focus on some key thematic issues and how they evolved.

Inevitably, as it arose against the background of the study of other East Asian Buddhisms, and coming somewhat later, the study of Korean Buddhism has always had to justify its position vis-à-vis its better-known neighbors, who almost seem to demand: what is special about Korean Buddhism? How does it differ from Chinese Buddhism?[7] Such questions hearken back to the colonial period, when Japanese colonial scholars read Korean Buddhism through a colonial lens, and emphasized its supposed derivativeness from Chinese Buddhism (Y. Kim 2011). Such colonial

7. See the recent review by Charles Jones of Richard McBride's *Aspiring to Enlightenment* as an example; critiquing McBride for not using a standard definition of Pure Land Buddhism, that definition is actually based on Japanese Buddhist practice, and hence this amounts to pushing Korean Buddhism into a Japanese frame of reference (Jones 2020).

narratives have had a surprisingly long shelf-life, arguably because the fraught nature of the South Korean decolonization process: both the division system and authoritarian regimes have waylaid a full decolonization process (Jin Young Park 2016, Y. Kim 2011, Shim 2000). However, for most Korean scholars this is not much of an issue since the academic peers they interact with are mostly fellow countrymen, therefore this framework need not be explicitly tackled. Western scholars on the other hand find themselves mostly communicating with scholars of other Asian Buddhisms, or from other East Asian studies programs, and thus often feel they have to define what is specific to Korean Buddhism.

This is exactly what Robert Buswell does in what can be considered a pioneering attempt to introduce Korean Buddhism to a larger audience, namely his entry on "Buddhism in Korea" for the *Encyclopedia of Religions* (Buswell 1987). A bare-bones overview of the history of Buddhism in Korea of barely four pages, it nevertheless emphasizes two aspects: "…the unique variety of *hoguk bulgyo* ('state-protection Buddhism') that was thereafter to characterize Korean Buddhism" (422) and "…one of the most characteristic features of the mature Korean Buddhist tradition…that of syncretism" (423). The genealogy of these two concepts is of course well known and need not be repeated here; suffice it to mention Jae-ryong Shim's critique of the reduction of Korean Buddhism to syncretism (Shim 1989), and Mohan Pankaj's critical reflections on the limits and merits of the concept of state protectionism (Mohan 2006).

However, the point here is not to criticize, but to show the influence of Korean Buddhist scholarship: Buswell's essay is essentially a summary of Korean scholarship. Especially in the incipient stages of their careers, many Western scholars of Korean Buddhism turn to Korean scholarship: in the absence of any useful scholarship in English or other Western languages, naturally they turn to Korean scholarship to fill in the blanks.[8] This I regard as a natural phenomenon, since it would be foolish to ignore the efforts of those that went before; Buswell in his early research on Korean Buddhism refers for his views to famous Korean Buddhist scholars, and for my own

8. See Mohan (2011, 282) for a similar observation.

research I relied heavily on the wealth of studies on Goryeo Buddhism (Vermeersch 2008). Especially in the early stages of one's career this is almost inevitable.

However, both fields and scholars evolve, and earlier views can be abandoned, reviewed, or repudiated. Thus, in 1998 Buswell published a critical reflection on the problem of Korean uniqueness. Using Benedict Anderson's framework of imagined community, he wrote a compelling essay on the Korean Buddhist *imaginaire*, its modern limitations and premodern possibilities, basically concluding that premodern Korean monks imagined themselves part of a ecumene rather than a nation-state (Buswell 1998). Such perspectives were refined in other publications on this theme, including a Korean translation (Buswell 2011).

The culmination of this process of dissociation and reintegration with Korean scholarship is surely his edited volume, *Currents and Countercurrents* (2005). As the subtitle *Korean Influences on the East Asian Buddhist Traditions* suggests, this volume brings together a number of chapters that investigate how Korean monks or texts influenced Chinese or Japanese Buddhism. Moving beyond the limiting discourse of *uniqueness* vs. *derivativeness*, this volume shows East Asian Buddhism as a process with many "flows and counterflows," intricate patterns of interaction that are easily ignored but that provided the lifeblood of the tradition. Korean monks were both influenced by Sinitic Buddhist traditions and helped to shape it, rendering the notion of unique national traditions moot.

This is undoubtedly a landmark study; even though most of the individual monks and their activities have been well studied, it is the overarching narrative in which they are here placed that gives fresh meaning to their activities and impact. In section 4 in particular we will see more examples of the fruits of transnational perspectives. How far they benefit from the impact of this work is difficult to assess, a point we will return to in the next section; in a sense, it is both a catalyst for and a reflection of changing interests.

A second theme that allows us to trace the arc of development of Western Korean Buddhist studies is the position of Joseon Buddhism. The emphasis on what are thought to be the main exponents of the tradition,

the founding fathers of high textual scholarship (i.e., Wonhyo, Uisang, and Woncheuk), has contributed to the view that what came after was derivative, or failed to live up to the high levels attained previously. The views of Japanese colonial scholars likely played a role too: given the suppression of Buddhism, Joseon Buddhism was seen as but a pale reflection of preceding eras, characterized by stasis, superstition, and low-grade scholarship.

One of the first to try and look at Joseon Buddhism on its own terms rather than in comparison with its Silla or Goryeo *heyday* was Lewis Lancaster. Although fully acknowledging the precarious position in which Buddhists found themselves during Joseon, he also urges, "Rather than assuming that Buddhism was a weak and beaten institution, we perhaps should look for the strength which had allowed it to remain a part of the culture and to revive as conditions improved" (Lancaster 1998, 123). Although many aspects of his 1998 article now feel dated because of the unsubstantiated claim that it was meditation that sustained the tradition (121) and the disparaging of the Joseon scholastic tradition, nevertheless the importance of his attempt to see Joseon Buddhism as the vital link to the present cannot be overstated. As was the case for Chinese Buddhism, the focus on a supposed golden age has tended to obscure anything that came after; moreover, it has led to the disparaging of early modern traditions at the expense of a supposedly superior antiquity that had to be recovered ('the golden age of Chan').

Whether or not through Lancaster's efforts, in the past twenty years we have seen a gradual rise in interest in Joseon Buddhism. Not only in terms of quantity and quality, but also in terms of the status of the tradition: rather than a "weak and beaten institution" many now look at achievements of Joseon scholiasts, at the rebuilding of Buddhist institutions after the Imjin War, art and ritual of late Joseon, and the often-positive relations between Confucian scholars and Buddhist monks, to name but a few aspects. Indeed, the image of Joseon Buddhism has improved to the point that Hwansoo Kim recently published an article reminding us that the suppression faced by Buddhism was very real, and that the recovery and flourishing of Buddhism in late Joseon were relative (H. Kim 2017). Perhaps inferring that the recent spate of articles that attempt to reevaluate Joseon Buddhism risks giving

the impression that Buddhism was not in a precarious position, he uses the concept of collective trauma to show how even after the end of the Joseon dynasty, many Korean monks remained very sensitive to the humiliations suffered at the hands of Confucian officials.

In short, here too we see an interesting arc of evolving scholarly opinion based on the recognition of each other's work. Despite differences in opinion, there is also a consensus, in this case on the state of Joseon Buddhism, and hence a shift in interests but also in the representation of Korean Buddhism, which is in many respect very different now than twenty years ago; comparing Lancaster's article (1998) with Kim Hwansoo's (2017) or other recent research on Joseon (e.g., Seong-uk Kim 2013) shows that huge strides have been taken. In terms of Silla and Goryeo Buddhism, the biggest shift probably took place in the 1990s, with the abandoning of descriptive markers of uniqueness, and the consensus that Korean Buddhism should be understood in its East Asian context. However, this certainly does not mean that the impact of Korean Buddhism as a force in its own right has been abandoned; Plassen (2020) is an interesting example of a Western scholar's very strong emphasis on the impact of Korean Buddhist scholasticism on China.

The Great Divide: Non-communicating Vessels?

As mentioned above, while it is still possible for one person to digest almost the whole corpus of English writings on Korean Buddhism, this is manifestly impossible for Korean-language research.[9] Therefore in this section I have relied mostly on previous attempts by Korean scholars to outline trends. In particular, I have tried to look at research articles that try to tease out research trends, or that take account of Western scholarship on Korean Buddhism.

9. I am not aware of any attempt at quantifying the number of scholars or scholarly production in Buddhist studies in South Korea, but the very fact that there are no less than 13 KCI-registered journals is an indication of the size of the field. See Jae-hyeon Park (2013).

As pointed out by Eunsu Cho and Jong Myung Kim in their Korean translation of Robert Buswell's *The Formation of Chan Ideology in China and Korea* (Buswell 2015, 19), studies of Western scholars are hardly ever cited by their Korean colleagues; language barriers are certainly a factor, but apart from that, one might also speculate that they are not considered research but rather attempts at introducing Korean Buddhism to an English audience. Over the past few years a number of articles have appeared in Korean Buddhist studies journals that try to summarize such topics as "Westerners' recognition (*insik*) of Wonhyo" (Ji Yun Kim 2016) or the research of Robert Buswell (Suah Kim 2013). While they are careful to represent the research of these scholars accurately, at the same time the main purpose appears to be not so much to assess what they have contributed to the study of Korean Buddhism, but rather how they appraise it. Thus, the former article is replete with sentences like, "For Robert Buswell, Wonhyo is the greatest scholar that the Korean Buddhist tradition produced" (Ji Yun Kim 2016, 63) or "for Richard McBride, Wonhyo was a great monk of Silla and the most famous Korean Buddhist exegete" (78).[10] Suah Kim notes especially Buswell's merit in putting Korean Buddhism on the map (2013, 183).

To my knowledge, the only scholar who has explicitly highlighted this gap is Jong Myung Kim. In the introduction to his study of the Lantern Festival (Yeondeunghoe) and Eight Prohibitions Festival (Palgwanhoe) in Goryeo, he lists some problems that he observed in studies on the same subject by Korean scholars. Some of his points would take us too far outside the scope of this paper, but the third and seventh are certainly relevant, namely the lack of engagement with prior research and the omission of any reference to Western research (Jong Myung Kim 2018, 17–23). As for the former, the author specifies that prior research is cited yet not critically engaged with (19), thus leaving general assumptions and existent frameworks of interpretation intact (18).

I would add to this—and this is really more a refining, not a substantially new point—the lack of engagement with critical literature outside one's own field. At a certain point, primarily in American academia, the referencing

10. Compare Bu (2005) for a more incisive engagement with Western scholarship.

of critical theory became fashionable to the point that no PhD thesis in Buddhist studies—or any field of the humanities—could be written without invoking at least a few luminaries such as Foucault, Said, Baudrillard, or Anderson. In his 1995 overview of research trends in Buddhist Studies, John McRae thus referred somewhat sarcastically to the "politically correct chic of Bernard Faure's oscillating voice" (McRae 1995, 356). The work of Bernard Faure—dealing with the East Asian Zen tradition, yet weaving it into a rich tapestry that includes virtually every luminary of the Western social sciences and humanities—is certainly an outlier, but it also set a benchmark that helped to convince other scholars of the necessity of connecting with larger trends in the humanities.

By contrast, in Korean Buddhist studies, this is mostly not the case; most PhD dissertations, articles, or books on Korean Buddhism, while extremely varied in the topics discussed, and also in the depth and originality of interpretation, rarely refer to any non-Buddhist scholar that could provide a methodological angle to the research. This is of course a generalization; perhaps it is still true for the mainstream, i.e. the majority of established researchers in Buddhist studies in Korea; yet as we will see in the final section, the field is now more and more diversified and globalized. And there are interesting exceptions in the mainstream too; for example, Yong-tae Kim has written several articles that do use post-colonial studies to critically reflect on the field of Buddhist history.

Since he has also written on the bigger research trends over the past hundred years, Yong-tae Kim's work fits in very well with the purpose of this section, namely to look at the globalization of Buddhist studies from the perspective of Korean academia. Kim appears to be the first Korean scholar to critically apply the concept of Orientalism to the way Korean Buddhism has been studied and represented over the past century or so. Noting the characteristic biases of Buddhist studies as it formed in 19th-century Europe, namely its textual bias and origin bias, he then ascertains how that was filtered through Japanese academics who in turn influenced Korean Buddhist scholars. Through the prioritizing of the historical Buddha and the early textual evidence, pioneering scholars and their successors denigrated later developments, dismissing Mahāyāna and Zen Buddhism as mysticism

and superstition (Y. Kim 2011, 233). Thus, they created an image of East Asia through textual imagination, turning East Asian Buddhisms into others from which the actual community of East Asian Buddhists were excluded. However, as Japan was the first to absorb Western academic trends, although an other from a Western perspective, it projected the same biases on the Korean tradition, thus making Korea into the other to reclaim agency for itself.[11]

But Yong-tae Kim does not stop at diagnosing this legacy of the colonial period, he also uses it as a framework for establishing the main hallmarks of modern Korean Buddhist studies. These are, according to him: first, a bias against what are considered "unenlightened" aspects of the tradition, which are seen as obstacles to Buddhism's survival; second, Korean Buddhism's initial neglect of the nationalist movement and its later catching up through state-protection Buddhism (itself a colonial legacy); third, a focus on "syncretic" Buddhism (*tong bulgyo*) as the supposed essence of Korean Buddhism; and fourth, an exclusive focus on Seon Buddhism as the main legacy (Y. Kim 2011, 246–252). His work is important as an exercise in self-reflective criticism of the colonial legacy in modern (i.e., post-colonial) Korean Buddhist studies. Although perhaps not the first to point this out,[12] it is the most trenchant analysis of this problem. There are other attempts at ascertaining the main trends in Korean Buddhist studies, but most are either fragmentary or focus on statistics rather than qualitative analysis.[13]

An interesting result of Yong-tae Kim's research is the reevaluation of Joseon Buddhism. Dismissed by Japanese scholars, in particular Takahashi Tōru, as but a pale reflection of Silla or Goryeo Buddhism, this bias

11. See Y. Kim (2011, 235, 252–253). In his analysis, Japan thereby becomes a "secondary other" in relation to the Western subject, and the rest of East Asia (Korea, China) the actual other. However, in terms of its identification as an advanced Westernized nation, Japan could also be considered the subject/agent, certainly in relation to Korea.
12. See for example Jin Young Park (2016). Jae-ryong Shim (2000) also points to the Cold War tensions and the crises following liberation that impacted Buddhist studies. Shim (1989) is arguably the first article to point out the lingering effects of colonial models, yet it is not cited by Kim, perhaps because it is in English; he does, however, cite Shim (2000), a Korean version of his arguments.
13. See for example Bae (2015), Jong Myung Kim (2000), and Lee, et al. (2012).

remained even after the colonial period. Although difficult to put a date on when this perception began to change, it is interesting to see a similar trend in Western studies of Joseon, where its reevaluation began in the late 1990s. Yong-tae Kim likely built on earlier efforts at studying important Joseon masters,[14] but gave an important impetus by removing the lingering bias against the Joseon ritual and doctrinal tradition, still seen as inferior to what preceded. As he points out under the fourth point, the doctrinal tradition was as important if not more so than Seon, something still often overlooked.

Thus, we see through the example of Yong-tae Kim's articles that, though somewhat later than in the West, the critical framework of critical thinkers outside one's field is also being applied in Korean Buddhist studies. This is likely thanks to articles by Jaegwan Sim(2002), Min Yong Lee (2005), or Sung Taek Cho (2006) that introduced Western trends in Buddhist studies. This suggests the importance of the translation of critical works but also of the transcultural efforts of the scholars mentioned; educated at least in part in United States or other Western academic institutions, they perform an important bridging function in critically evaluating Western research trends in Korean. Given the fact that translations and introductions of Buswell's works are a relatively late phenomenon, perhaps we may soon perceive their impact.

Finally, another factor may be the lingering influence of traditional Buddhist approaches to texts. Given the importance of the lecture halls (Shim 2000, 3–7; Kaplan 2020) and Buddhist universities such as Dongguk or Geumgang Universities, basic textual exegesis and hermeneutics remain very important. Although Jae-ryong Shim labels the period 1961–1979 that of exegetical study (*haeseok jageop*), followed by a period of multi-disciplinary and multi-cultural approaches (from 1980 onwards),[15] in fact that seems premature: a truly multi-cultural and interdisciplinary approach is still in the process of taking off, while textual studies remains strong. It is perhaps more apt to see these as parallel streams. In fact, it is sometimes

14. See notably Choe (1988).
15. The first period being that of "enlightenment" (1945–1960) (Shim 1999, 181–185; Shim 2000, 8–13).

difficult to say where the academic study of Buddhism ends and religious exegesis begins (Jae-hyeon Park 2013, 33); a typical Buddhist conference in Korea starts with a triple refuge ceremony, so that it takes on religious aspects in addition to the academic setting. Although the world of monastic training is also evolving rapidly (Kaplan 2020), as a dominant force within the academic study of Korean Buddhism, it still exerts a strong influence, ensuring the continued importance of close textual study.

Translation of Technical Terms: Non-translation vs. Interpretation

In a volume that brings together essays on the state of Buddhist studies around the world, Yeongseop Go makes a case for the necessity of translation to globalize Korean Buddhist studies—but also for the Koreanization of global Buddhist studies (Go 2016). Among his main concerns are the fact that Korean research is insufficiently known abroad (4–5), and that current English translations of Buddhist source texts lack critical acumen (17). Certainly, valid criticisms, but at the same time the article betrays a number of unrealistic expectations toward the translation of both sources and secondary literature.

That Korean scholarship is insufficiently known abroad may be true, but is translation then the best option? As outlined in section 1, many foreign scholars of Korean Buddhism have in fact cited their Korean colleagues copiously, thus introducing their main research conclusions. If "communication" (*sotong*) is the main issue, merely translating is not necessarily the best option. Every research article is an act of communication in various respects, but primarily it addresses previous articles: it complements them, corrects them, or criticizes them, but it assumes the reader (as the decoder of the message) is to a certain degree familiar with previous research. Translating a random piece of research takes it out of this communicative context into a strange language, where it is effectively orphaned, and even a specialist reader may struggle with its contents.

A pioneering effort in introducing Korean research (not acknowledged by Go) is a series curated by Lewis Lancaster in four volumes that appeared

between 1989 and 1995. It introduces key articles on seminal figures and texts, but when I read them even as an MA and beginning PhD student, many chapters were extremely challenging to read. Thus, Hyung-keun Oh's treatise on Yogācāra studies in Silla (Oh 1991) is so replete with texts and terminology that it requires much additional reading to be understood; by contrast, Eunsu Cho's chapter on Woncheuk, the main Yogācāra exponent of Silla, in *Currents and Countercurrents*, discusses the same themes in the context of both Korean and Western research in a manner that is much more accessible to Western students (Cho 2005).

Regarding the translation of source texts, it is certainly true that the two translations of *Samguk yusa* cited by Go (by Tae Hung Ha and Dalyong Kim, respectively) are problematic in their translation of terms and phrases and their lack of scholarly apparatus (Go 2016, 17). As an example of how a translation should be done, Go holds up as a model the *Collected Works of Korean Buddhism* (Korean title, *Hanguk jeontong sasang chongseo*) (22). First of all, because they were based on team translation rather than individual translation (9) and second, because they were "based on the Korean (*uri mal*) translation, and determined the meaning through discussion between the Korean translator and English translator" (26). The importance of the team translation is certainly a very valid point, and there is a trend in Western academia to move from the model of an individual translator who is a "highly erudite polyglot" to team translations (Bingenheimer 2010, 28–36).

Yet, as someone who took part in the project lauded by Go, I should also add that in practice it was not exactly a model of communication. Translators were not involved in the selection of texts, and most of the actual strategies of translation had to be worked out on the go: with this I refer to discussions about Romanization, style, annotation, handling of technical terms, etc. Since the project had to be finished in two years (for thirteen volumes of 500 pages on average), there was not enough time to work out all the differences, and often little communication about changes; while the end result is solid, the fact that two different Romanization systems are used across the volumes is testament to less than perfect communication. As pointed out in the introduction, the model of monastic team translation

from the Tang lauded by Go and others (see Bingenheimer [2010, 26–29]) was organized within the country that wanted (and needed) the translations into Chinese. This ensured that all required texts were translated in a way that suited the host culture. In the case of the *Collected Works of Korean Buddhism*, however, the target culture was not taken into consideration: what kinds of text would interest the US academic reader? How should they best be presented? Through which publisher or what platform? None of these aspects were taken sufficiently into consideration, and in the end the series was published by the Jogye order itself, and is today no longer available in printed form.[16]

I think it is important to point out these problems so that future translation teams can take them into account to improve the model. However, as Bingenheimer points out, although many are in favor of collaborative translations, the current research climate is a very serious impediment: most academic institutions put little value on translation. Because of the emphasis on original research, and rapid publication, there is little incentive to put in place the kind of academic infrastructure needed to nurture translators and translations (Bingenheimer 2010, 36).

Finally, a very important point overlooked by Go and many other Korean scholars who would like to see more English translations is the problem of terminology. While Koreans have the luxury of simply preserving the original Chinese terms in their translations, this would make little sense in the case of English. Buddhist translations at least have the advantage that Sanskrit equivalents are seen as suitable in English translations, but in many cases—especially for the Sinitic commentarial literature or apocryphal texts—there is no such equivalent. The multivalence of Sinitic terms poses particular problems for the translators, since the translation may sometimes vary depending on the context. One translator of Confucian texts even lamented that the lack of suitable equivalents for terms like *i* and *gi* could "kill" the tradition (at least in terms of academic interest in Neo-Confucianism) (Kalton 2008).

16. They are, however, available on the web thanks to the efforts of one of the chief collaborators, A. Charles Muller: http://www.acmuller.net/kor-bud/collected_works.html.

Even a seemingly simple term such as *mun* 門 ('gate') becomes anything but simple when used in commentarial literature. Although it is a term that is ostensibly self-evident, used in a figurative sense it becomes much more slippery. Most translators, including Buswell, seem to translate it as "approach," in the sense of a method, i.e. "an entry way into a certain subject." However, in some cases it seems to be used simply in the sense of "parts" of a text, and sometimes literally "gate." Crucial terms in *Wonhyo's Commentary on the Vajrasamādhi sūtra* are *gae* 開 and *hap* 合, or "opening up" (for analysis) and "combining together" (as synthesis) (Buswell 2007, 42). Here too we have deceptively simple words. One of the ironies of Buddhist studies is that the complicated-looking transcriptions of Indian words are usually much more straightforward to deal with than such basic Chinese character words. As Park Sung-bae has pointed out, this translation suggests a duality or process, whereas the term *gaehap* should be interpreted as a synchronous event (Ji Yun Kim 2016, 67).

There is no simple solution to this; the only way out is simply to remain attentive to this problem. Michael Kalton proposed simply abandoning any attempt at complete fidelity, but instead trying to connect the text to modern concerns and contexts. Similarly, Jin Young Park (2016) makes a strong case for a contextualized approach: rather than simply translating the "complete works" of a certain author, start from the question what the reader from the target audience is interested in. Quoting Merleau-Ponty, people do not read a classic to know what kinds of questions the ancient writer was grappling with, but to see what their wisdom can offer for the problems we are grappling with right now. Combining Kalton and Park's words of advice, we therefore have to look towards crafting translations that somehow resonate with people in the here and now. Most importantly, it should be understood that the translator cannot remain neutral: sticking to a literal translation of terms will render the text unintelligible to those who do not know classical Chinese; hence the translator needs to be a researcher-interpreter, who adds their interpretative voice to the text, even if it risks being a mistaken or one-sided interpretation.

The End of Traditional Buddhology?

In a review of the revised edition of Donald Lopez's *Prisoners of Shangri-la*, Kurtis Schaeffer notes that when the book first appeared in the 1990s, "…the contours of the field…were easier to discern at a glance. 'Tibetan Buddhist Studies' referred to one of several varieties of area study, reducible to anthropology, history, and philosophy" (Schaeffer 2020, 765). Schaeffer notes also that it was the study of Tibetan Buddhist philosophy in particular that could lay claim to a certain history in North American academia. However, the picture is now much more complicated:

> …art history, gender studies, environmental studies, literature, linguistics, psychology, and other fields are now part and parcel of Tibetan Buddhist studies. And, more radically, the very notion of distinct disciplines is less easy to work with than it was in the 1990s. There are several reasons for this: the rise of the internet, the 2008 financial crisis and ensuing delegitimation of humanistic fields, and the global rise of scholarships in forms that do not always accord with, and sometimes are openly hostile to, formerly regnant styles of Western scholarship. (Schaeffer 2020, 765)

Although there are many differences between Tibetan Buddhist studies and Korean Buddhist studies, I think that ultimately a similar assessment can be made. Perhaps the shift is more marked in the case of Tibetan Buddhism: possessing its own canonical translations (the Kangyur), a mythical Buddhist land under occupation (Shangri-la), and the person regarded as the "spiritual leader" of global Buddhism (the Dalai Lama), Tibetan Buddhism is simply a much bigger presence. With a large proportion of its monastic community living in exile, many Tibetan monks have entered Western academia (Schaeffer 2020, 766). In other words, a truly transnational Buddhology has formed, in which the old Western-centered gaze that was the focus of Lopez's study is now much less relevant.

Arguably to a much smaller degree, this is also happening in the case of Korean Buddhism, where scholars of Korean descent (sometimes of monastic lineage) have taken on a leading role in teaching and researching

Korean Buddhism in the United States.[17] The extent to which the generations of scholars who entered the field after the 1990s are "openly hostile to formerly regnant styles of Western scholarship" is a moot point; I certainly do not know of such hostility in the field of Korean Buddhism. What is certain is that the field has diversified, both in terms of scholars and topics covered. This shift is arguably greater in the case of the United States, where Buddhist studies was throughout the 20th century dominated by white male scholars, who were moreover educated almost exclusively in the North American academy.

In Korea, by contrast, almost from the beginning of Buddhist studies the role of scholars with overseas training has been important, starting with Giyeong Yi, widely regarded as the doyen of Buddhist studies, who finished his PhD degree in Belgium in 1960. Many followed him, though mainly studying in the United States rather than Europe. The impact they had on the research trends is well reflected by the reactions to Jae-ryong Shim's (who obtained his PhD from the University of Hawai'i) critique of the *tong bulgyo* thesis. The critique of something that had been taken as a well-established trait of Korean Buddhism triggered a lot of soul-searching, with many studies expanding on his critique, but many others trying to salvage the concept.[18]

In American academia, as far as I know, Sung-bae Park was the first Korean-born scholar to establish himself as professor of Buddhist studies (at SUNY Stony Brook), but since then there has been a steady increase. However, since most finished their graduate training in the United States, they do not seem to have been the catalyst of new trends per se; rather, their work reflects the changing nature of the field and the new research trends that have emerged in American academia. Su Jung Kim's analysis of 80 PhD dissertations on Buddhism produced between 2000 and 2007 thus reveals a striking diversity of topics—including art, philosophy, women

17. To wit: Seong Uk Kim (Columbia), Hwansoo Ilmee Kim (Yale), Jin Y. Park (American University), Pori Park (Arizona State University), Su Jung Kim (DePauw), and Ahn Y. Juhn (University of Michigan). I here include only scholars with a tenure-track position in a North American institution, and only those that I am aware of.

18. See Sang Young Kim (2014) for a thoughtful review of the debates and the actors involved.

and Buddhism, the interface between Buddhism in Korea and neighboring countries, history, and fieldwork among modern monasteries (S. Kim 2017).[19] Rather than radical methodological breaks, it is the expansion and diversification of research topics that is most striking.

But besides the greater mobility of scholars, what seems to be bringing the fields increasingly closer together is the global impact of research evaluation trends. As mentioned briefly in the previous section, translation of Buddhist texts remains difficult to justify for junior scholars because they receive little credit for it. This is surely what Schaeffer means with the "delegitimation of humanistic fields": as I interpret it, it refers not so much to the oft-quoted "crisis in the humanities," but rather to the fact that research approaches intrinsic to the humanities are not recognized. Instead, the research model of STEM disciplines, especially the measuring of impact factors, has become a universal measuring tool, despite its inherent unsuitability for humanities.[20] This has produced increasing pressure to publish quickly, and to publish short research papers rather than monographs or translations.

Arguably, this pressure is even greater in Korea than in the United States; at least in the US, the monograph is still accepted as the chief research output for evaluating tenure in the humanities, whereas in Korea research articles are virtually the only way to obtain promotion or tenure. The stresses this puts on Buddhist studies is revealed in an article by Jae-hyeon Park (2013). Comparing the impact factor of Buddhist studies journals with journals in other fields of the humanities, he finds that they score below average in terms of their impact factor on the Korean Citation Index (KCI) (29). He attributes this to a lack of interest in citing others' work, and to the low quality of research (i.e., that much of it is not worth citing) (31). Ultimately, he argues, this is due to the fact that monks or members of Buddhist organizations constitute a large portion of the Buddhist studies

19. Seven of these are devoted solely to Korean Buddhism, and two partly.

20. See for example Konkiel (2018). This is a fairly random article on this issue; since I am not familiar with this field, it was difficult to choose the most relevant research. However, this article certainly summarizes the problem succinctly and proposes alternative evaluation tools for humanities research.

community, thus diluting the academic quality (36).

Regardless of the merits of this analysis, the article shows how deeply accepted the use of citation indices as a measure of quality is. One could reverse the argument, however, and claim that thanks to the presence of monk-scholars, traditional values of text-based scholarship are being preserved. Like most humanities research, citation figures of articles almost never exceed the single digits, and a large portion of these are self-citations, so the minimal differences between several fields of humanities should not be regarded as very significant in itself.

There may also be positive side effects of the increased digital marking of research. Since most scholars now access articles via databases rather than through the journals in their field, it is much easier to cross-reference with other fields; also, the shorter format of articles and the continuous increase of platforms (new journals, research databases, researcher-focused sites, etc. keep appearing) is leading both to increased specialization and the crossing of borders, since many can combine different niche areas as well as different languages of publication.

Finally, to point to another opportunity in this crisis, I would like to again refer to the research of Marcus Bingenheimer. Given the importance of teamwork in translation, but the difficulty in actually bringing people together, he offers the case study of an online platform through which various scholars could collaborate on the translation of the Chinese Āgamas, which, when completed, would constitute the biggest text translated from Classical Chinese to English. Given the importance of translating key terminologies consistently, the platform runs a program that can compare how translators handle the same term, and also allows them to compile glossaries and cross-check with the translations chosen by others (Bingenheimer 2010, 36–41).[21] I am not yet aware of any similar digital humanities projects in the field of Korean Buddhism, but the case described by him—which involves the collaboration of Taiwanese monks and Western academics—sounds like a suitable model for Korean Buddhist studies.

21. See also his website for further examples of the application of digital humanities to Buddhist studies: https://mbingenheimer.net/.

Conclusion

Like any organization, academia has its own particular cultures and sub-cultures, which differ again across national borders. As a particular organization akin to ancient guilds, there are established codes of conduct, and established norms about what constitutes good research and bad, or what is a suitable topic and what not. The problem is that these are often implicit expectations. This leaves the researcher in a quandary: how to assess what is absent? Is it the result of a culture of silence, of peer pressure, of advisor's influence? These factors are difficult to assess, as it would require fieldwork research to tease out the culture of the field.

This is beyond the scope of this paper, but being a participant observer—I have taken part in many academic events concerning Korean Buddhism in the US, Europe, and Korea—has certainly helped in knowing what to look for in the published literature, to which I have restricted myself for this paper. Some of my conclusions are necessarily tentative since a qualitative analysis should be backed up where possible by quantitative analysis of data to confirm, refine, or reject my assumptions about trends.

Still, I think it can be established that the early development of the study of Korean Buddhism by Westerners was greatly indebted to the research efforts of their Korean colleagues, and hence many of their conclusions and arguments are reflected in English studies when Western academia began to take serious notice of this field in the 1980s. Later, we see reactions against earlier conclusions—both in the West and in Korea—but also a refining of earlier notions of uniqueness or new perspectives on what makes Korean Buddhism Korean. But the impact of Korean research on the West has remained constant.

By contrast, Western studies of Korean Buddhism are rarely cited in Korean-language research. This is actually quite normal: An Italian or French medievalist would probably bristle at the idea of citing Korean research. But English being the main standard for academic publications, and the increasing pressure to publish in English has certainly contributed to Korean academia taking notice of what is being studied abroad. Thus, from the start of the 21st century we gradually see the reflection of global

Buddhist studies trends in Korean academia, together with the first translations and summaries of Western research on Korean Buddhism. At the same time, the globalization of methods of research evaluation has also contributed to the rapprochement of Korean Buddhist studies in Korea and abroad.

Terminology remains a major stumbling block for fluid communication, and a prerequisite for Korean scholars taking an interest in Western translations should be a basic understanding of this problem before judging the quality of the translation. Given the increase of Korean scholars trained in US academia who are capable of publishing and presenting in both English and Korean, perhaps a better understanding of this problem is beginning to emerge. Finally, efforts need to be made by both Buddhist and Korean government-backed institutions to find alternative platforms for the support and evaluation of long-term collaborative projects such as the translation of both source texts and secondary literature. At the very least, they should consult widely before embarking on ambitious translation or research projects.

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