
The Korean Buddhist Empire: A Transnational History, 1910–1945

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Hwansoo Ilmee Kim's *The Korean Buddhist Empire: A Transnational History, 1910–1945* is a fascinating piece of scholarship about Korean Buddhism in the Japanese colonial period. This is a natural offshoot of his earlier book *Empire of the Dharma: Korean and Japanese Buddhism, 1877–1912*, which investigated the various influences of Japanese Buddhist missionaries on Korean Buddhism. This new book examines through a lens of transnationalism the dynamic ways in which Korean Buddhism during the Japanese colonial period underwent transformation from a traditional/marginalized religion to a modern/dominant one.

Korean Buddhism during the Japanese colonial period provides scholars with many compelling research opportunities. Because Buddhism was already a major religion in Korea and Japan (unlike in other countries that experienced Western colonial rule, which had to confront Christian missionaries), Korean Buddhists had to meet Japanese Buddhist missionaries as colonizing forces. Korean Buddhists encountered contradictions: on one hand, they saw Japanese Buddhism as the religion of the colonizers, while on the other, they regarded it as the model for a modern form of Buddhism that enjoyed high social status and effective systems of education and

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propagation, to which Korean Buddhists aspired. As the author explains in the Introduction and Chapter 5, it was this contradictory perspective that eventually brought about the construction of religious nationalism rather than political nationalism.

Although Buddhism itself acquired a transnational nature from its spread across cultural and political borders in ancient times, the various Buddhisms of Asian tradition developed distinct cultural identities. The Japanese colonial government saw Japanese Buddhism and Korean Buddhism as two separate religions and it understood that Japanese Buddhism served the colonizers while Korean Buddhism served the colonized. Therefore, supporting the Korean monastic communities institutionally and financially, the colonial government fully utilized Korean Buddhism as a colonial religion and a tool to gain easy control over Korea's large Buddhist population. At the same time, Korean Buddhists were able to take advantage of the opportunities colonization presented to participate in transnational Buddhism. The author argues that Korean Buddhists created global Buddhist networks within the Japanese Empire, and, through negotiations with the colonial government amid Japanese expansion during the wars of the 1930s and 1940s, finally advanced them to achieving their own form of modern governmentality and propagation. As the author emphasizes throughout the book, the theory of transnationalism is a useful tool for understanding and interpreting Korean Buddhism in this era.

As the author mentions in the Introduction, his aim in writing this book is simple: to display the ways in which "Korean Buddhists played an integral part in Buddhist transnationalism even though they were colonial subjects" (p. 3). The author maintains that most previous studies on Korean Buddhism in the colonial era closely examined whether Korean Buddhists collaborated with or resisted colonial rule based on a nation-centered historiography and that this nationalist approach hindered a comprehensive overview of colonial Buddhism, in particular, when it was brought to the forefront of Japanese wartime mobilization movements. The author argues that colonial Korean Buddhism should be examined in terms of transnationalism in order to fully understand not only its modern

transformation but also the dilemma facing Korean Buddhists, namely their conflicted feelings about Japanese Buddhism.

In the first two chapters, the author vividly illustrates the ways in which Korean Buddhism came to gain global recognition and join the network of Japanese and Chinese Buddhists. The configuration of a religious identity among Korean Buddhists can be said to have begun when two printing projects of the Goryeo Canon, a collection of woodblocks of Buddhist sutras carved in the 13th century and preserved in the Haein Monastery, were sponsored by the Japanese colonial government in 1915 and 1937 (p. 35). In addition, the Buddha's Birthday Festival, or Hana Matsuri, that was initiated by Japanese and Korean Buddhists and then sponsored by the colonial government, inspired a feeling of transnational Buddhist identity among Korean Buddhists (p. 92).

According to the author, these two cases demonstrate the way the colonial situation permitted Korean Buddhists to create their own sense of belonging to a transnational Buddhist community, even though these events were begun for political purposes by the Japanese. Whereas the first two chapters focus on the contextualization of the transnational Buddhist identity, the next two chapters concern themselves with two Buddhist figures, Yu Guanbin and Sōma Shōei, who exemplified the way transnational Buddhist networks operated.

The last two chapters highlight the author's main argument, namely that the force of transnationalism played a role in transforming Korean Buddhism from a local/colonial religion to an international/colonizers' religion in the late colonial period. In particular, the author points out that the very act of providing financial and administrative support to the construction of the great head temple Taegosa indicates the colonial government's deep involvement in making this great head temple of Korean Buddhism "a by-product of the state's needs and Korean Buddhists' tactics" (p. 187). The author further argues that Korean Buddhist leaders such as Bang Hanam and Yi Jonguk prioritized Buddhist nationalism over political nationalism and appropriated the colonial situation and Japan's war efforts in order to establish the great head temple and a central administrative office (p.

222). In addition, he argues that, because the colonial government needed strong support from Korean Buddhism for the war mobilization movement, the seamless cooperation between the state and Buddhism was encouraged and is evidenced by the increasing number of Buddhist propagation halls that grew up in cities in Korea as well as in the Korean Buddhists' success as "a colonizing force" in Manchuria (p. 275).

Hwansoo Kim's contributions to Korean Buddhist scholarship lie not only in his extensive research and analysis, which employ numerous primary sources written in different languages, such as Korean, Japanese, and Chinese, but also in his use of the theory of transnationalism to examine colonial Korean Buddhism. He argues that this new theory is required in order to explore three major features of Korean Buddhism—Buddhist nationalism, governmentality, and propagation. His ambitious title "Korean Buddhist Empire" telegraphs his idea that Korean Buddhists used religious nationalism in order to gain official recognition within and beyond colonial Korea, and to win financial support from the imperial government and, through these actions, managed to convert Korean Buddhism from a colonial religion to "a kind of colonized colonizer" (p. 278) religion in the late colonial period.

The author mentions that the term transnationalism contains a double meaning: first, it is a general expression that refers to the transnational features of pan-Asian Buddhism and second, it has a specific meaning that refers to Korean Buddhists' "sense of belonging to both an imagined and a real religious community" (p. 7) across borders. A sense of pan-Asian Buddhist identity emerged among Korean Buddhists through some events sponsored by the colonial government, such as, as mentioned above, the printing project of the Goryeo Canon (Chapter 1) and the Buddha's Birthday Festival (Chapter 2), as well as through the cooperation of Korean Buddhists with Japanese war mobilization movements "under the rubric of pan-Asian nationalism" (p. 233) so as to achieve their own governmentality and propagation (Chapters 5 and 6). It seems that the path that Korean Buddhism took to achieve modernity was very similar to that of Japanese Buddhism, namely benefitting from the state by supporting the

state's imperial propaganda. This reviewer suggests that it could be worth questioning the differences between the author's transnationalism theory of Korean Buddhism and previous studies that have analyzed pan-Asianism in colonial Korea.

In addition, a further analysis of the relationship and conflicts between religious nationalism and political nationalism among Korean Buddhists would have been welcome, as these two ideologies were created differently by the imagined communities and they were both constructed within the boundaries of the Japanese Empire. Although the author expresses a desire that his book will generate more diverse and creative approaches to colonial Buddhism, his main argument regarding religious nationalism may reignite another wave of binary perception, such as religious nationalism versus political nationalism during the colonial era.