

Korean Buddhist Nuns and Laywomen

Hidden Histories, Enduring Vitality

Edited by
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SUNY

an impressive work that provides vivid in-depth interviews and the personal history of Sŏn'gyŏng Sŭnim, a nun who lived through the end of the Chosŏn dynasty, Japanese colonization, and into the era of modern Korea.

5. Ha Chunsang, *Kkaedarŭm ŭi kkot* (Flowers of Enlightenment; Seoul: Yŏrae, 1998), 121.

6. Many of her writings have been translated into English and other foreign languages, including her most recent work, *No River To Cross: Trusting the Enlightenment That's Always Right Here* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2007).

7. In *hwaŭdu* (C. *hualou*; J. *waŭto*; literally, "word-head") practice, meditators focus on the point, or key line, of a *kongan* (C. *kungan gongan*; J. *kōan*; "public case").

2

Female Buddhist Practice in Korea—A Historical Account

Eun-su Cho

How can there be [gender distinctions between] monks and nuns
in the Buddhadharmā?

How can there be the worldly and the nonworldly?

How can there be north and south?

How can there be you and me?

Pon'gong Sŭnim (1907–1965)

One of the fundamental tenets of Sŏn (C. Chan; J. Zen), which forms the basis of modern Korean Buddhism, is that in the Buddhadharmā there is no distinction between male and female, worldly and nonworldly phenomena. There is, however, a considerable gap between this nondualistic ideal and what is actually practiced. Pon'gong's verse quoted here¹ seems to question this gap, as the author is conscious of her dual status as a woman and as a Sŏn teacher who defies that womanhood.² Poems and other overlooked sources offer us glimpses of the enduring vitality displayed by Korean nuns, who have maintained a history of thorough practice that has been almost completely ignored: the history of Korean Buddhism has so far always been restricted to the history of monks alone.

The nuns' sangha began when the historical Buddha, Śākyamuni, ordained his maternal aunt and foster mother, Mahāprajāpati, and five hundred other women. When the Buddha permitted the ordination of nuns, he demanded that they observe eight chief rules of respect to monks. For anyone concerned about the status of women in Buddhism, this is a problem that causes considerable anguish. Scholarly

research to date on this subject is largely divided into two camps. The first maintains that these regulations did not reflect the thinking of the Buddha himself but were created in later times by his conservative disciples. The second holds that although the Buddha may have said this himself and his own disciples may have created these regulations, this was merely an expedient means, an empty statement to placate Indian society of the day. This second view emphasizes the fact that Buddhism is one of the few major religions in which female clergy exist alongside their male counterparts, with equally independent organizational structures and religious functions. Regardless of which interpretation is adopted, at the time of Śākyamuni it was codified that the Buddhist order is made up of the four assemblies—female and male clergy, and female and male lay believers—a fact that in itself indicates the longevity of the egalitarian and democratic nature of the social and political ideas of Buddhism.

However, unlike the Buddha, who advocated and practiced the idea of gender equality within the limitations of his time, the later institutions of Buddhism were corroded by the patriarchal societies and cultures in which they formed. Korea was no exception to this, and its nuns suffered constant ordeals solely and specifically because they were women.

KOREAN BUDDHIST NUNS FROM THE FOURTH CENTURY TO THE PRESENT

Despite the paucity of historical materials, it is generally agreed that a Korean nuns' order was established at almost the same time as the order of monks, namely, on the transmission of Buddhism to Korea. The two seminal historic sources for ancient Korea, the *Saṃguk yusa* (Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms; written by the monk Iryōn [1206–1289] toward the end of the thirteenth century) and *Saṃguk sagi* (History of the Three Kingdoms; an official history compiled in 1145 by Kim Pu-sik and others), both contain records of Buddhist nuns and female lay practitioners, proving the existence of Korean nuns from the very beginning of Buddhism in Korea some 1,600 years ago.

Buddhism came to the Korean peninsula in the latter half of the fourth century through China, during the Three Kingdoms period. Koguryō (37 B.C.E.–618 C.E.) in the north was the most powerful of the three kingdoms, and received the new religion first. There is a record stating that the introduction of Buddhism to Koguryō took place in 372 C.E., when King Fu Jian (r. 357–384) of the former Qin

dynasty (351–394) sent the monk-envoy Shundao (K. Sundo) to the Koguryō court with scriptures and images. Around the same time, the Paekche kingdom (18 B.C.E.–660 C.E.), occupying the southwestern part of the peninsula, was introduced to Buddhism in 384 through another monk-envoy who had come from Eastern Jin. The kingdom of Silla (57 B.C.E.–935 C.E.), in the southeastern part of the peninsula, was officially introduced to Buddhism about two centuries later than the other two, in 527. However, even though these dates are regarded as the official introductions of Buddhism, it is believed that actual contact happened much earlier, probably by the third century.³

The Three Kingdoms Period and Unified Silla (676–935)

The earliest record of Buddhist women in Korea comes from the *Saṃguk yusa*, which records a woman known only by her surname, Sa, a younger sister of Morye, a local leader in the Ilsŏn area of Silla. Both of them are said to have helped Ado, a monk from Koguryō, perform his missionary work of spreading Buddhism some one hundred years before it was officially accepted by the Silla court. Lady Sa became a nun, thus marking the first recorded appearance of a Buddhist nun in Korean history. The queen of King Pōphūng (r. 514–540), along with her husband, converted to Buddhism at the time of its official acceptance in 527. When the king became a monk after renouncing the throne in 540, the queen also became a nun, "out of respect for Lady Sa's path." However, Lady Sa and the queen could not have received official ordination. Women were only allowed to become Buddhist nuns after a decree was issued to that effect in 544, the fifth year of the reign of King Chinhaeng (r. 540–576),⁴ the successor of King Pōphūng.

It is well known that nuns from Paekche went to Japan and played a definitive role in the establishment of a nuns' order there. The first record of Paekche nuns comes from a Japanese history, *Nihon shoki*, which states that Paekche sent Buddhist missionaries, including a nun, to Japan in 577. It is known that Paekche began to regularly dispatch Buddhist doctrinal specialists, psalmists, iconographers, and architects to Japan over its well-developed sea lanes, thus transmitting the rudiments of Sinified Buddhist culture and laying the foundation for the rich Buddhist culture of the Asuka (552–645), Hakuho (645–710), and Nara (710–794) periods.⁵ It is also mentioned that a Paekche nun named Pōmyōng went to Tsushima Island in 655 and cured a Japanese high official of an ailment by reciting the *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa Sūtra*.⁶

This exchange also went in the opposite direction. There is a record that three Japanese nuns, whose names are recorded as Zenshin-ni, Zenzo-ni, and Kenzen-ni, came to Paekche in 584 and received novice precepts as well as full ordination in 588.⁷ An envoy from Paekche explained their ordination ceremony to the Japanese court as follows:

The way to receive their bhikṣuṇī ordination is thus: they receive their *pratimokṣa* precepts from ten bhikṣuṇī preceptors and then they go to a bhikṣu temple and request ten bhikṣu preceptors, such that they receive precepts from twenty monks and nuns. However, in this country [i.e., Japan] there are only bhikṣuṇīs. There is no bhikṣu preceptor or bhikṣuṇī preceptor, thus if these bhikṣuṇīs want to receive the bhikṣuṇī ordination properly, they should establish a bhikṣu order. Also, they have to invite bhikṣuṇī preceptors from Paekche.⁸

This description of the process and requirements for bhikṣuṇī ordination shows that the first ordained Buddhist priests in Japan were women and that they became ordained without meeting the standard requirement of receiving precepts from ten bhikṣus and ten bhikṣuṇīs, a fact that may have caused some controversy. At any rate, this passage tells us that a formally recognized female order existed in Paekche in a much-advanced form at that time.⁹

Once Silla adopted Buddhism and ordained Buddhist nuns, the religion flourished throughout their society, which had previously been without any organized form of religion, and thus regarded this new tradition as providing an advanced worldview and a loftier principle of morality. It was during this time in Silla and the subsequent Unified Silla period (676–935) that the doctrinal study of Buddhism made its greatest advancements in Korean history. At the same time, the society of Buddhist nuns also seems to have flourished. The existence of a position called Toyunarang,¹⁰ apparently denoting the head of bhikṣuṇī affairs, also indicates that there was a bhikṣuṇī order with a substantial number of members.

After Silla's unification of the three kingdoms in 676, the Unified Silla period brought great prosperity in Buddhist activities and the deepening of doctrinal understanding. The two most important historiographies dealing with the Three Kingdoms period, the *Samguk yusa* and the *Samguk sagi*, were both written during the subsequent Koryŏ dynasty, and contain many stories related to Buddhist women.¹¹

The *Samguk sagi* details historical events of the three kingdoms from the rulers' perspectives, arranged in chronological order under the kings' names. It records women from royal and aristocratic families such as the wife of King Chinhŭng who became a nun, and the wife of Kim Yusin, the general who assisted King Muryŏl's war for unification (she herself was the third daughter of the king), who entered priesthood after her husband's death. To the contrary, the *Samguk yusa*, compiled at the end of the Koryŏ dynasty by Buddhist monk Iryŏn (1206–1289), features many stories of miraculous deeds of religiously pious women from different walks of life: from ladies of royal and aristocratic families and bhikṣuṇīs, to the wife of a poor man and a slave girl. Their accounts are found in the form of tales, life histories, and historical Buddhist events.

Chihye, from the period of King Chinpyŏng (r. 579–632), performed many meritorious deeds. While staying in Anhŭng-sa, she devoted herself to the restoration of a Buddha's hall, but was short of resources. In answer to her prayers, a celestial woman appeared in her dream and offered help.¹² Another tale, this one with a nun, involved the famous scholar-monk Kyŏnghŭng, who lived during the reign of King Sinmun (r. 681–692), after he became seriously ill. After a few months of suffering, he received a visit from a nun who looked at him and said that his disease was caused by worries and fatigue, and thus joyfulness and laughter would serve as his cure. She then made an eleven-faced comedic mask that she wore while performing a dance, providing a ridiculously funny sight. It was so silly everyone laughed uproariously. Without him even noticing, the monk's illness disappeared. The nun vanished into a Buddha hall, with only her walking stick left behind in front of the eleven-faced [Bodhisattva] statue in the hall.¹³ Tales like this involving mysterious women and bhikṣuṇīs are abundant in the *Samguk yusa*. It must have been a local legend passed down to Iryŏn's time and it would be too much of a stretch to use this tale to provide any general statement on the status of bhikṣuṇīs and how they were perceived by society. Yet, this is an unusual story in that a nun is credited with curing one of the most renowned Yogacāra monks, someone who had been appointed as "Kungno" (National Elder) by King Sinmun. Thus, the rendering of this history and the unusual laughter therapy (the *Samguk yusa* indicates she must have been an incarnation of Bodhisattva Kwanŭm) tells us that bhikṣuṇīs were indeed worthy of entering the mystical pantheon of the Three Kingdoms period.

The story of Ungmyŏn, a slave girl who entered the Western Paradise by chanting Amitābha Buddha's name, may perhaps be the

most moving narrative about women's religious practice found in the *Samguk yusa*. One day she followed her master's attendance at a ten-thousand-day chanting ceremony and made a resolution that she herself would do the practice as well. Upon returning home, she didn't stop chanting and her master became jealous, so much so that he burdened her with the weighty task of milling ten bushels of grain every night. However, she would finish the work by early evening and return immediately to the temple for prayer where she stood outside in the courtyard, continuing her chanting. One evening, the assembled worshippers heard a voice from the sky inviting her to enter the main Buddha hall. Suddenly the sound of heavenly music was heard from the west, and a swift whirlwind swept into the palace of the Buddha. Ungmyŏn was lifted into the sky through a gaping hole in the ceiling and roof, rising higher and higher as she flew toward the western side of the temple.¹⁴

Beyond these tales of magic and mysticism are the records of more quotidian acts of donation. Such records detail not only aristocratic women who gave money as donations for the building of bells, stupas, and stone lanterns, but also poor women who donated their labor to the Buddhist community as meritorious acts. Many such stories are found in the *Samguk yusa*.

The works of such women were not limited to the Korean peninsula. There are also records of nuns active in missionary work in the expatriate community outside of Silla. Ennin's diary records the presence of Korean nuns outside of Korea as early as 839-840 in a monastery called Fahua-yuan (Lotus Cloister) in the Shandong area of China, originally built by Chang Pogo, a Korean general.¹⁵

The Koryŏ Dynasty (918-1392)

After the Unified Silla period, the Koryŏ dynasty made Buddhism a state religion and the Buddhist order became more organized and secularized. There was a centralized administrative body that dealt with clerical affairs and the monks' examination system. Many notable monks were appointed to various positions and given various titles throughout the dynasty, whereas nuns were apparently excluded from both examinations and official positions and titles. Bhikṣuṇī ordination ceremonies were performed, but contain no records of female masters whose names are singled out for notable Buddhist practice or deeds. The only exception is Bhikṣuṇī Chinhae (1255-1324), who was granted the posthumous title of *yŏdasa* (literally, "female master"), as illustrated in chapter 5, "Two Female Masters of Two Eras: Differences and Commonalities in Roles."

Because Buddhism was the Koryŏ national religion, royal family members played key roles in promoting it. The women of the royal families of the Koryŏ dynasty were especially avid practitioners of Buddhism and fervent supporters of the religion and the saṅgha as well. Some of them went so far as to become nuns themselves later in their lives, such as the wives of the founding King T'aejo, Queen Sinhye (family name Ryu) and Lady Sosŏwŏn (Kim), and the wives of King Kongmin, Queen Hye (Lee) and Queen Shin (Yŏm).

Queen Mother Inye, the wife of King Munjong (1019-1083), left conspicuous footsteps in the history of Korean Buddhism and the religious life of Buddhist women in Koryŏ as sponsor of the Ch'ŏnt'ae sect founded by her son, the famous Taegak National Preceptor, Ŭich'ŏn. Inye was a daughter of Yi Chayŏn of the Inju Yi family, the mightiest aristocratic clan at that time, and, along with her two younger sisters, married King Munjong as part of a political scheme to further establish family influence and produced eleven sons and two daughters. Among her sons, three became monks, including Ŭich'ŏn. She herself commissioned the publication of the *Hua-yen sūtra*, copied important Yogācāra Buddhist treatises in silver calligraphy, built a thirteen-story golden pagoda, sponsored dharma gatherings for confessional purposes in the Ch'ŏnt'ae style, and established Kukch'ŏng-sa Monastery as her own home temple. Most significantly, she helped Koryŏ Buddhism turn toward a new direction by sponsoring her own son, Ŭich'ŏn, with generous funding to embark on a number of endeavors in Sung China and later provided the material foundation for his new Ch'ŏnt'ae sect via the establishment of Kukch'ŏng-sa Monastery. These elite women exerted a great influence on Koryŏ Buddhism and served as critical patrons of many Buddhist works.¹⁶

On the other hand, the bulk of nuns and laywomen of this period remain generally anonymous. In the few cases when nuns' names do appear, it is in the lists of disciples on the stelae inscriptions for great male masters. In such cases, the women are all from distinguished family backgrounds. The bhikṣuṇīs found in the stela inscription for Hyesim (1178-1234), who was the successor of the famous Pojo Chinul (1158-1210) and was posthumously invested as National Master (*kuksa*), can be cited as examples. As chapter 3, "Male Sŏn Masters' Views on Female Disciples in Later Koryŏ," indicates, altogether only three inscriptions have been found so far that record the names of male masters' female disciples, and these masters were all Sŏn monks, rather than monks belonging to the doctrinal schools.¹⁷ For example, a letter from a female practitioner inquiring about her progress in *hwaṇu* meditation and her teacher Hyesim's response shows how serious they were as practitioners of Sŏn. Unfortunately,

those communications were kept in the anthologies of male masters, and they usually presented only the male masters' responses and perspectives on Buddhist women's practice, not those of the women themselves.

However, given the social milieu of Koryŏ as a Buddhist state and with the direct governmental support of the religion, it is assumed that numerous aristocratic women became Buddhist nuns after their husbands' death, and that Buddhist practice by women believers was flourishing. It has also been argued that there is a relative abundance of historical information on the financial and spiritual support of Buddhism by Koryŏ women in Yuan China, where a good portion of the ladies attending the court, as well as some women married to high officials, were of Korean origin. Such is the story examined in chapter 4, "Koryŏ Ladies and the Encouragement of Buddhism in Yuan China."

The Chosŏn Dynasty (1392-1910)

Chosŏn society has been understood as that of a monolithically Confucian culture, so ideologically dominated that Confucianism controlled both the public and private spaces of peoples' lives while Buddhism was suppressed and forced underground. However, a closer look reveals that this cannot be true. Confucianism and Buddhism surfaced and submerged alternatively, fluctuating with political fortunes. The existence and nature of the bhikṣuṇīs and Buddhist women during the dynasty might serve as crucial keys to shed new light on a more nuanced understanding of the state.

From the beginning of the Chosŏn dynasty, the government promulgated an anti-Buddhist policy, challenging a Buddhist establishment that had long enjoyed the privilege and support of both the public and the government as a state religion. With the advent of Chosŏn, which adopted neo-Confucianism as the prevailing ideology for the country, the Buddhist community faced social suppression and discrimination and suffered a subsequent decline. The government's restrictions included a law that monasteries could not be built near cities and towns but had to be constructed in the mountains. Monks and nuns could not enter the capital and had to wear large hats to cover their faces when they went out.

Buddhist women suffered a form of double oppression, in that (1) their religious lives were curtailed as a result of anti-Buddhist policies, and (2) their social lives were restricted by the legal and

cultural oppression of women authorized by neo-Confucian ideology. Monastic and laywomen practitioners became subjects of moral scrutiny. Whenever Buddhist laywomen or bhikṣuṇīs were recorded in Chosŏn-dynasty annals, they appeared due to their accused involvement with Buddhist monks and under charges of violating Confucian moral codes, especially chastity. The worst examples were accusations of adultery between bhikṣus and bhikṣuṇīs, and assumptive charges of adultery between monks and laywomen, based on the latter's frequent visits to monasteries. Some records even accuse certain women in Buddhist robes living outside the city as having been involved in prostitution.

One particularly momentous scandal involved a group of high-class women and bhikṣuṇīs attending a Buddhist ceremony in the earlier period of the dynasty, during King Sejong's reign in 1434. Hoeam-sa was an important Buddhist monastery of the Chosŏn dynasty. Located near the capital, it was famous for the notable monks who resided there, such as Muhak, who was the personal advisor of the founding king of the dynasty, and also as a dedicated temple for a deceased queen. However, the monastery had recently fallen into serious disrepair. The king suggested using government funds for renovations but was rebuffed due to his ministers' objections. Monks wrote letters "encouraging merit" and circulated them in person to powerful families. Donations came in, the reconstruction was planned, and a commemoration ceremony was announced. Many women of aristocratic families came to participate in the ceremonies and attend dharma talks. As three monks were performing a Buddhist dance, some women donated their robes and silk as gifts. When details of the gathering became known, an investigation commenced with the interrogation of the temple monks and the women involved in the incident. The investigation revealed that a few government officials and many women from royal or aristocratic families attended the ceremony and bhikṣuṇīs accompanied their visit to the monastery. The king's own mother-in-law had also attended. The women's participation in the religious activity, and specifically their occupying the dharma hall with male monks and staying overnight at the temple, were highly criticized as being in violations of the state code that decreed: "Women who go to Buddhist temples along with monks will be regarded as having lost their chastity." Such women violated not only the Confucian social norm of separation of men and women, but engaged in the activities of "heresy" and "religious deceit." More than twenty people, including the monks and the aristocratic women

(most of them widowed), received beatings, and the higher aristocratic women paid fines in exemption. The royal family, on the other hand, was exempted.

Such were the strictures that limited women's Buddhist participation in the highly Confucian Chosŏn dynasty, when visits to Buddhist temples by women were controlled or sometimes prohibited outright, depending on the reign. The Buddhist women who were leaving home to become nuns were also denounced as disobeying patriarchal authority. Unmarried women who became nuns were argued to be damaging the harmonious force of the universe by not marrying. Widowed wives who sought to become nuns were thought to be trying to go beyond the patriarchal law's boundary. Where they once had a father, and then a husband who had died, they were expected to then remain in the care of their sons. Thus, women who tried to become nuns were seen as trying to escape from the Confucian moral realm, acts perceived as not only threats to the social order but even violations of the very fabric of the universe. Confucian officials and servant Confucian students brought numerous petitions banning unmarried women from becoming nuns and requesting that bhikṣuṇīs be sent back to their home. In this way, the religion, especially in the institutional space, fell under the control of the state. As the number of ordained monks and nuns were controlled, the state had the power to disrobe monks or nuns and send them back to their homes. Nevertheless, the state was never fully able to control their personal choices and could not simply disrobe the monastics without reason.

The Buddhist women were seen in many ways as beings who were dangerous to the social order the Confucians were trying to build. Buddhist women were frequently depicted as tainted and potentially tainting because of their Buddhist faith and their status as women, so frequently the accusations naturally implied and linked them with sexual impropriety. The annals of King Sukjong (1661–1720), whose reign saw the harsh suppression of Buddhism, record a petition received in regards to a bhikṣuṇīs temple's flourishing religious activities, in which Buddhist nuns were summarily described with the following characteristics: "lewd and seductive," "shrewd," "destructive of public morals," "betraying of husbands and masters," "unchastised," and "cunning practitioners of adultery." These records obviously reflect a less than charitable view held by Confucian historians and statesmen toward women and Buddhism.

Throughout the dynasty, these types of accusations and petitions brought to the court and persecutors' offices were incessant. Yet, given official declarations of Confucian piety, the charges served as an

ironic reflection that Buddhist practice was still quite alive. Despite an environment of fierce anti-Buddhist criticism and rampant accusations against them, Buddhist women were recorded as visiting temples and entering the priesthood. There were copious accounts of women who dared to leave home once their husbands had died, directly challenging the social mores that prohibited widows from any such behaviors. The story of an aristocratic woman who "ran away" on the funeral day of her husband to become a nun is just one example. She would later become a renowned nun and abbot of Chŏngŏpwŏn, a royal nunnery. Many women incorporated the Buddhist religion as a part of their lives and Buddhist monasteries were their spiritual refuges. They chose a countercultural religious path in their personal space and the state tried, but could not fully intervene within it.

The less than totalizing aspect of anti-Buddhist cultural policy is reflected not only in its application, but also among personalities at the highest levels of the government enforcing it, chief among them the aforementioned King Sejong, the fourth king of the dynasty. He was respected as the greatest and most literary among the Chosŏn kings for establishing an administration based on Confucian rule. Yet Sejong himself suggested that his ministers support the restoration project mentioned earlier as his own elder brother Prince Hyŏryŏng, a pious Buddhist, requested. However, the ministers adamantly objected that pitiful people's labor and the country's precious resources would be spent for that sort of purpose. Ultimately, the king relented. Regarding petitions aimed at curtailing Buddhist monasteries, the king replied that the Buddhist teaching had a long history and it would be difficult to reform the religion by diktat. He repeatedly beat back the tedious accusations and anti-Buddhist harangues lodged by Confucian officials' regarding all matters of temple affairs. The affairs of Haeamsa Monastery alone were brought up a total of forty-eight times in the annals during the thirty-two year reign of King Sejong, and he defended the temple in most of these. Even after the incident, when there were reports of local government harassment, he intervened on behalf of the monastic community. Toward the end of his life, he visited the temple and also granted gifts, including an exemption from taxation.

In fact, we find many Chosŏn kings who were scrutinized under suspicion of their Buddhist faith. For instance, King T'aejong, the third king of the dynasty, prohibited temple construction on behalf of late kings and queens and sought to control the number of monks via a quota system. However, after a brutal political career, he then converted to Buddhism in his old age and personally visited many

monasteries. What these examples reveal is that at the core of these controversies, it was never simply a struggle between Confucian ideology and Buddhist religion, but also a struggle for power between the king and the ministers, embedded within the cultural matrix of the Confucian political system surrounding them. In other words, the anti-Buddhist criticism might have been a superficial cover for an underlying desire to check the king's power using the excuses of religion and culture. King Sŏnjo (1552–1608) in the mid-Chosŏn period suffered repeated accusations and petitions from the students of the Confucian academy attacking his and his cohorts' suspicious activities involving Buddhist worship inside of the court. Running on the basis of a check-and-balance system, the Chosŏn ruling system allowed ministers the power to correct the king if they had to, even as the king was considered a being bestowed by heavenly order.

The survival of Buddhism as an important religious and social practice of the Chosŏn people was particularly dependent on female members of the royal family and wives of state officials and Confucian literati. Not only in this case, but in many others, there were many kings and queens who also defended for the Buddhist community. When a government proposal was submitted calling for all *bhikṣuṇī* temples in the capital to be centralized into one single *bhikṣuṇī* temple for ease of oversight and control, it was the royal family who eventually stopped the proposal. Women in the court were also the major force in maintaining the Buddhist faith tradition, for there were royal nunneries within the palace grounds during both the Koryŏ and Chosŏn dynasties. These royal *bhikṣuṇī* convents (*piguni-wŏn*) were located attached or adjacent to the palace, and were institutions where women of the royal family and nobility took the tonsure and led religious lives. The fortune of these nunneries waxed and waned depending on the king in power, with the most severe period being that of the violent despot Prince Yŏnsan (r. 1476–1506), who evicted the nuns—erstwhile court ladies of his late father—and turned them into slaves. Except for this brief period, however, nunneries for the court ladies existed throughout the dynasty.

The Buddhist activities of Chosŏn women were not necessarily always in direct competition or conflict with the standards of society. In fact, their form of religious practice can sometimes be considered to have been a new form of faith that appeared in Chosŏn society precisely to avoid trouble between the two religions. For instance, these royal and aristocratic women also acted as major patrons of Buddhist art in early Chosŏn. Their activities suggest that, compared to men, women were less directly subject to the strictures of Con-

ucian ideology and policy and thus were able to bypass the possible conflicts that would have arisen had their husbands taken part in such activities. These women chose to express their Buddhist faith by providing financial support for the construction of Buddhist temples and monasteries, the production of new paintings and statues, and the building and repairing of pagodas. Indeed, in the beginning of the dynasty, there was a marked increase in the number of Buddhist artworks commissioned by upper-class women, who became the most powerful patrons of Buddhist art, taking over the role of male patrons in the previous dynasty. They also promoted the publication of Buddhist scriptures, translated from Chinese into Korean.¹⁸ From records of donations (such as paintings and statues of the Bodhisattva Kṣitigarbha and the Ten Kings of the Underworld) and of the dissemination of related scriptures and the like made by the wives and daughters of respectable families praying for the positive rebirth of their deceased parents and other family members, we can see the union of Buddhist faith and the Confucian moral concept of filial piety.¹⁹ It might even be argued that these women developed their Buddhist faith as a religion of the private sphere and Confucianism as a religion of the public sphere.

Despite the ideological attacks and social denunciations from Confucian scholars, we nevertheless find in the annals of that age individual practitioners of Buddhism, even among literati. For example, Yulgok Yi I (1536–1584), one of the two most renowned Confucian scholars and statesmen during Chosŏn, committed himself to Buddhist practice upon the early death of his mother. He left home and became a monk in the famous Diamond Mountains for a short time, an act that marked him, even posthumously, when he was temporarily prevented from being properly enshrined in a Confucian shrine, despite having openly attacked Buddhism at the height of his career. Other members of the Confucian elite remained steadfastly Buddhist in their private lives, engaging in scholarly exchanges with monks or making pilgrimages to monasteries and worshipping there. Although Confucianism, as a social conception of the state, and Buddhism, as a faith in the private domain, thus would seem to have been mutually exclusive, there were overlapping elements.

Toward the later days of the Chosŏn dynasty, with orthodox Confucian rule well established in every nook of society, all forms of public Buddhist practice began to disappear. With a mid-dynasty policy banning monks and nuns from entrance to the city now firmly entrenched, temples disappeared from the capital and other cities; only those in the countryside survived. Whether or not such charges

were true, accusations against the practice of Buddhism by women in the later half of the dynasty diminished, becoming mixed in some cases with shamanistic practices. An epic poem composed by the progressive Confucian scholar Tasan Chŏng Yag-yong (1762–1836) while he was on exile in To'gang (present-day Kangjin), "To'gang goga pusa" (A Story of a Woman Who Married a Blind Man of To'gang) introduces a young girl who was forced to marry an old blind man by his threatening father and the deceit of a matchmaker. She escapes from this brutally abusive husband to a temple and shaves her head to become a Buddhist nun. However, her destiny didn't stop there. She was dragged to the court as her husband reported her to the magistrate. This tale of women using the temple as a refuge from harsh life is telling not only as simple evidence of the enduring presence of female Buddhist institutions, but also of the role these institutions played in a society that was often cruelly repressive to women. The Buddhist temples persisted, as did bhikṣuṇīs, and the survival of their practice until the very end of this dynasty is itself a testament to its vitality.

The Colonial Period (1910–1945)

The Japanese colonial period provided a platform for experimentation within Korean Buddhism. At the beginning of this period, some Korean Buddhists reacted ambivalently to the favorable attitude of the Japanese toward Buddhism and the actions of Japanese missionary-monks who were supported by the colonial government. This ambivalence was rooted in the wariness of colonization in the guise of religious affinity—a concern borne out by the official annexation of the country by Japan in 1910.²⁰ Selected Korean Buddhist monks gained access to higher education and received support in Japanese monasteries, yet stood vulnerable to the charge of collaborating with an aggressive colonizer. In contrast to the "mountain Buddhism" of the late Chosŏn period, however—which had been characterized by private and individual modes of practice and hence almost devoid of any institutional vigor for participating in public affairs or opportunity for self-restructuring—the colonial period allowed modern Buddhist monks the social space in which to play an active public role. The Japanese incursion thus forced Korean Buddhists to face the social demands for modern initiatives. This sense of urgency, from both inside and outside, demanded a response.

Amid this rapid social and political change, Korean Buddhist women, who had long been silenced, emerged to form their own

modern community. After centuries of social disdain both toward Buddhist practice and toward women taking part in religious life, what these women found were crumbling, humble monasteries that inspired in them a fervent desire to establish bhikṣuṇī shelters where they could live and practice. It is remarkable that in such a challenging time female clergy were able to commence the institutionalizing of their community.

Under the leadership and with the support of Man'gong Sūnim (1871–1946), a renowned Sŏn master monk of the time, a bhikṣuṇī Sŏn meditation facility, or community (*sŏwŏn*), was established at Kyŏnsŏng-am hermitage belonging to Sudŏk-sa Monastery, and accepted bhikṣuṇī meditators for the retreat season in January 1916. This is the first record of such a meditation facility for nuns in modern Korea. In many ways, Man'gong Sūnim was the founding father of the bhikṣuṇī practice traditions that resumed in modern times. Many of the nuns whom he accepted as his disciples and encouraged to practice later became leaders of bhikṣuṇī society.²¹ In 1918, Ongnyŏn-am of T'ongdo-sa was designated a seminary for doctrinal study (*kangdang*, or *kangwŏn*), and doctrinal education for bhikṣuṇīs was resumed after a long period during which the community of female monastics seemed to have lacked any strong organizational basis.

After the opening of Kyŏnsŏng-am in 1916, Sema Sūnim opened the meditation facility Sorim *sŏwŏn* of Naejang-sa in 1924; Sŏngmun Sūnim opened Pudo-am of Tonghwa-sa in 1927; Sŏjŏn of Chikchi-sa in 1928; Yunp'il-am²² of Taesŏng-sa in 1931, and Samsŏn-am of Haein-sa in 1945; Pon'gong Sūnim opened Chijang-am of Wŏlchŏng-sa in 1937; and Taewŏn Sūnim opened Kugil-am of Haein-sa in 1944. And after the 1918 opening of the seminary at Ongnyŏn-am of T'ongdo-sa, two other seminaries for doctrinal studies were opened at Pomun-sa and Namjang-sa, in 1936 and 1937, respectively. The *Pangham-nok* records (a register maintained at meditation facilities for their biannual, three-month-long summer and winter retreats) show that many Buddhist nuns were actively engaged in meditation practice during this period.²³

Although the social perception of Buddhism had been changing—and Korean Buddhists' yearning for serious practice increasing—during the colonial period, the actual conditions of living and practice were utterly poor. The facilities for Sŏn meditation and doctrinal studies previously listed were opened in ancient hermitages attached to main monasteries in the countryside. This meant that bhikṣuṇīs had to rehabilitate and rebuild these long-neglected structures from scratch. They gathered wood for repairing the buildings and collected rice

and other alms on foot. Sometimes their donation-collecting trips to other parts of the country took many months. They also walked many miles to find masters and listen to dharma talks and teachings. Stories of these brave women circulated in meditation halls and temples, encouraging many serious practitioners who became dedicated to the religious path.

Myori Pöphüi (1887–1974) stood out in this period. She spearheaded the movement to revive religious practice and Sön meditation among bhikṣuṇīs and is regarded as the builder of the modern Korean bhikṣuṇī saṅgha. Myori Pöphüi was born to a humble family in a village in South Ch'ungch'öng Province. Her father died when she was three years old. A year later, her Buddhist grandmother took the four-year-old girl to Mit'a-am, a hermitage of Tonghak-sa temple on Kyeryongsan Mountain, where she was cared for by Kwiwan Sünim, the abbess of the hermitage, who treated her like her own daughter. Her mother accompanied her and became a nun, taking the name Toch'ön. When Myori was eight years old, her mother suddenly died. From then on, separation and death became central questions in her life. At the age of fourteen, she took the ten *śrāmaṇera* precepts from Tong'ün Sünim and received the dharma name Pöphüi (dharma Joy).

Her life at Mit'a-am was spent as a novice nun, taking care of daily temple affairs, studying Buddhist scriptures and the teachings of various Sön masters, and practicing rituals and ceremonies. In 1910, when she was twenty-three years old, Pöphüi received full ordination as a bhikṣuṇī from Hae'gwang Sünim at Haein-sa temple. She then traveled to the Ch'öng'am-sa Temple in North Kyöngsang Province and studied the *Lotus Sūtra* under the guidance of Kobong Sünim (1890–1961), a renowned doctrinal master. Kobong encouraged her to meditate and told her about his teacher Man'gong Sünim. As a dharma successor to Kyönghō Sünim (1849–1912), a renowned master who has been labeled a “superstar in modern Korean Buddhism” because of his revival of the Korean Sön Buddhist tradition after the stifling Chosön period, Man'gong was the first male master in modern Korea who received bhikṣuṇīs as his students, trained them in Sön practice, and certified them as Sön masters.²⁴

Pöphüi resolved to study with Man'gong and left for Chöngnye-sa Temple on Töksung Mountain, where he was teaching. Man'gong had a vision of her arriving and came down the mountain to greet her. “Who are you?” he asked. “My name is Pöphüi, but I do not know who I am or where I came from.” Man'gong accepted Pöphüi as his student, and she stayed at the nearby nuns' hermitage, Kyönsöng-am (Seeing into One's Nature Hermitage). Other nuns gathered, and

together they rehabilitated Kyönsöng-am to make it their meditation facility. Man'gong once wrote a poem recounting the pitiful sight of young nuns carrying soil and wood in their A-frame backpacks, and encouraging them to bear these burdens as if they were the Buddha's golden robes.²⁵

Pöphüi later devoted herself fully to *hwadu* practice under Man'gong's guidance. She eventually experienced enlightenment and truly understood all the words of the Buddhas and the masters. In front of the general assembly, Man'gong recited a dharma poem and then issued the following challenge to the audience: “Tell me something about the flagpole!” The assembly remained silent. The silence was finally broken when Pöphüi rose quietly and said, “A fish is swimming around and the water gets clouded; a bird is flying in the sky and a feather is falling down.” Later, Man'gong publicly acknowledged Pöphüi's enlightenment, granting her another dharma name, Myori (Mysterious Principle), and composing a poem endorsing her dharma transmission. Pöphüi was thirty years old at the time.

She later gained an impressive reputation and enormous respect as a Sön master, both among her own disciples and from other Sön masters. The most eminent male Sön masters—Ch'unsöng, Kūmo, Chö'n'gang, Kyöngbong, Hyanggok, Kobong, and others—visited her for dharma exchanges. In 1966, she returned to Kyönsöng-am, which she turned into a modern institutionalized Sön meditation facility for bhikṣuṇīs. For the next ten years, she served as the center's headmaster and devoted herself to training disciples. As a result of her efforts, monastic training centered on Sön practice became the basis of the Korean nuns' tradition.²⁶

Another of the great nun masters of the twentieth century was Mansöng, who was ten years younger than Myori Pöphüi and also famous for her practice of Sön. She was renowned in the Pusan area for her excellent preaching. Mansöng's life is vividly described by Sön'gyöng Sünim (1903–1994), a Sön nun who studied under her:²⁷

She was born in 1897 in a poor farmer's family. She was married at a young age but, to her great distress, lost her husband very soon afterward. One day she went to Sangwön-sa to hear a dharma talk from Master Hanam. His talk comforted her, and she asked him, “I have heard there is a method for invoking the spirit of the dead. I have no other wish but to meet my husband one more time.” Master Hanam looked at her carefully and said, “You can only meet him if you become a nun. If you want to be free

of suffering, take refuge in the Buddha!" Later she visited Master Man'gong and received instruction. She continued to investigate her *hwadu* for five years, still as a laywoman, until she received confirmation of her awakening from Man'gong. Unfortunately Man'gong's poem of transmission to her has been lost. Shortly afterward, in 1936 at the age of thirty-nine, she became a nun and Master Man'gong gave her the dharma name of Mansōng (Manifold Nature).

Mansōng later stayed at Taesōng-am in Pusan and taught many female disciples. She also raised dharma topics with visitors, and there is a famous story of her bold words when she met Ch'unsōng and put her leg on top of the male master, asking, "Is this leg mine or yours?" This exchange became legendary among the meditation practitioners (this anecdote was told by Samu Sūnim).

These women practitioners practiced both together and separately. Even before the meditation halls and seminaries for bhikṣuṇīs were established, individual practitioners are known to have received teachings from notable teachers. For example, Myōm Sūnim (who is the dean of the Pongnyōng-sa Bhikṣuṇīs Seminary, one of the two most prestigious in Korea, the other being Unmun-sa Seminary) recalled that she practiced meditation along with male practitioners at Taesūng-sa *sōrwōn* in 1944—men such as Ch'ōngdam, Sōngch'ōl, Ŭbong, and Sōam, who became patriarchs and leaders of Korean Buddhism after the 1960s.²⁸ There were also nuns who sought out individual scholar-monks to learn the sūtras.

Taken together, these women's individual stories give us an overview of how they began to revive the long-lost traditions of meditation and doctrinal studies for Buddhist nuns in Korea. Their diverse and scattered efforts, combined with more structured activities, were later transformed into an institutionalized effort to reestablish the bhikṣuṇī saṅgha in Korea.

Besides the nuns' efforts to restructure the Buddhist saṅgha and rejuvenate the traditional way of practice during the colonial period, there was also a resurgence of Buddhist practice among laywomen, after long years of suppression during the Chosŏn dynasty. However, just when the Korean Buddhist saṅgha was focusing on the discourses of modernization of Buddhist society, laywomen's practices were often undermined as "superstitious" and "irrational." For example, Manhae Han Young-un (1879–1944), a leading ideologue-monk for the modernization of Korean Buddhist society and an anti-Japanese activist, put the "old" ways of practice at the center of his criticism,

believing them to be a major obstacle to Korean Buddhism's prospering and adapting to the changed era. He criticized the practice of "group chanting of Buddha's name" (*kosōng yōmbul*); Buddhist practice combined with folk religion, such as worshipping the seven stars of the Big Dipper, mountain gods, and others; and praying for good fortune—the very modes of practice that were most popular among Korean laywomen during the 1920s. His criticism was not explicitly directed toward women, but with the weighted influence of his call for modernization, a negative social perception labeling women's practice as superstitious had entered the mainstream by the 1930s.

Against this backdrop, a meditation facility called *puin sōnu hoe* (literally, "an organization for women meditator friends") was established under the Sōnhak-wōn Institute in Seoul in 1931. Later, another facility was opened at P'yohun-sa Monastery, called the P'yohun-sa *puin sōrwōn* ("women's meditation facility at P'yohun-sa"), in the Kūmgang-san Mountains area.²⁹ Many intellectual women were converted or entered monastic life, such as Kim Iryōp (1896–1971), the famous writer and social commentator, who converted to Buddhism and began the life of a monastic at the age of thirty-eight, upon the instruction of Man'gong Sūnim. Although the emergence of women as intellectuals, writers, and artists during the modern period in Asia is often assumed to have been prompted by the introduction of Christian beliefs and civilization, many such "New Women" in Korea found Buddhist religious practices and perspectives interesting to explore and of use in their professional worlds.³⁰

The Postcolonial Period (1945–present)

After the Korean War of 1950–1953, the Korean bhikṣuṇī community made remarkable advancements in its social presence and internal strength. Nuns rebuilt monasteries that had either fallen into ruin because of the war or had been unoccupied for a long time. They also served as frontrunners in the 1954–1955 Purification Movement.³¹ They saw this movement as providing the strategic momentum necessary to gain their rightful place in the saṅgha as a whole. After the Japanese colonial period, only a handful of celibate bhikṣus remained in Korea (most well-educated elite monks had either converted to Japanese Buddhism or joined the order of married monks), so at the peak of the movement, when married monks were purged through street demonstrations and legal suits, bhikṣuṇīs outnumbered bhikṣus.

At the beginning of the Purification Movement, some bhikṣus opposed the participation of bhikṣuṇīs, and the title of the first rally was

"National Bhikṣus Rally." But the third rally, in December 1954, was called the "Third National Rally of Bhikṣus and Bhikṣuṇīs" (*chōn'guk pigu piguri taehoe*), and thereafter, whenever a proclamation was read, usually by a monk, it began, "We bhikṣus and bhikṣuṇīs. . . ." Thus, the monks clearly acknowledged that the saṅgha should actually denote a community of both bhikṣuṇīs and bhikṣus, with each group having the other as an indispensable and equal partner to make a whole. Indeed, at the rally of December 11, 1954, the number of bhikṣuṇīs who attended was 221, whereas the bhikṣus numbered 211. The final document, signed when the protracted struggle was drawing to a close, bore the signatures of those who had attended or had sent in their letter of vote/attorney: 571 bhikṣuṇīs and 430 bhikṣus, for a total of 1,001 votes. It is interesting that the numbers of both monks and nuns attending had doubled in the course of a year.³²

In the middle of this long process of activities and discussions, the central administrative body for the saṅgha (*chonghoe*) and other committees were formed, and bhikṣuṇīs came to participate in those committees. Also, new agendas for the renewed saṅgha were discussed and written down.³³ A document submitted to the superintendent general's office in December 1954, as a response to the public negotiation initiated by the police after a series of public disturbances, called "Plan for the Purification of the Buddhist community," with 807 signatures (366 bhikṣus and 441 bhikṣuṇīs) is noteworthy in many ways. First, it defined roles, functions, and responsibilities in explicit form: monks and nuns (*sūngnyō*) are those who are dedicated in five areas of Buddhist practice—keeping the precepts, meditation, chanting, studying sūtras, and reciting mantras. Second, it mentioned the criteria for becoming the head of a monastery, but does not specify gender: no matter what the size of a monastery or temple is, monastics must complete a certain number of meditation retreats and finish their studies at the seminaries to be considered. Therefore, it is no wonder that, after the successful conclusion of the Purification Movement, many bhikṣuṇīs were actually appointed as abbots of monasteries.³⁴ Even the abbot of Tonghwa-sa Monastery, one of the twenty-three head monasteries of the nation, was a bhikṣuṇī, Sōngmun Sūnim (1893–1974).³⁵

After these years of turmoil and toil, the bhikṣuṇīs added to their power and institutional structures. Many meditation halls were established or reopened for formal training of nuns: Kugil-am of Haeinsa by Pon'gong Sūnim in 1948, Hoeryong-sa by Tojun Sūnim in 1954, Taesōng-am by Mansōng Sūnim in 1956, Sōnhae Illyun of Naewōn-sa by Suok Sūnim in 1957, Pudo-am of Tonghwa-sa by Sangmyōng Sūnim in 1957, Tongguk Cheil Sōnwon of Taewōn-sa by Pōbil Sūnim

in 1957, Chōngsu Sōnwōn of Sōngnam-sa by Inhong Sūnim in 1957, Yangjin-am of Tonghwa-sa by Sōngnyōn Sūnim in 1958, and Naewōn-sa of Tonghwa-sa by Changil Sūnim in 1959. In addition, bhikṣuṇī seminaries such as Ummun-sa and Tonghak-sa began to be rebuilt in 1955 and 1956, respectively, and Hwaun-sa Seminary was opened by Chinyōng Sūnim in 1957.³⁶ Monastic education and doctrinal study, which had been neglected throughout the Chosōn and colonial periods, thus began to receive a lot of attention. Initially, the emphasis was on meditation practice, but with the modernization of Korean society, the importance of Buddhist education was agreed upon by masters and disciples alike. Along with the establishment of modern education facilities for Buddhist monks and nuns (such as Myōngjin School in 1906, which later became a university of general education), support for the traditional education occurring at *kangwōn* (monastic seminaries for doctrinal study) was also under way. No longer perceived as an outdated and obsolete way of educating young minds, the traditional *kangwōn* education regained its status as a legitimate way of training monks and nuns. At first, male doctrinal masters and lecturers taught at the reestablished bhikṣuṇī *kangwōns*, but later the lineage of scholarship was handed down by female masters to female disciples.

The Contemporary Situation

After the dramatic social changes of the 1960s and 1970s—economic growth, adoption of general education for the nation, and the subsequent elevation of women's social status—the community of Korean Buddhist nuns entered a totally new stage. Over the last thirty years, the Korean nuns' saṅgha has grown to such an extent that half the ordained clerics of the Chogyee order are nuns.³⁷ Not only have their numbers grown but their status has risen significantly. Martine Batchelor, who lived in Korea as a Buddhist nun from 1975 to 1985 and traveled extensively in Asia, has observed that Korean Buddhist nuns have the second highest social status among Asian countries, next to that of Taiwanese nuns. She points out that Korean monks tend to offer the most respect to the nuns, coming closest to treating them as equals, and notes that all nunneries in Korea operate with a high degree of autonomy and are not supervised by monks.³⁸

My own candid assessment of contemporary Korean Buddhist society identifies the following six factors as possible explanations for the remarkable development in the Korean nuns' saṅgha over the past thirty years. In the absence of any in-depth research of the factors behind the success of the Korean Buddhist nuns' order, these are some

subjective reflections based on my observations and discussions with nuns and other believers:

1. *Collective cohesive power.* In a number of reforms in the saṅgha, the cohesion shown by the nuns served as a striking display of their capacities within the saṅgha. The nuns had formed a comparatively large collective inside a relatively narrow environment. Their lecture halls and meditation rooms were always overcrowded, and their living facilities were usually insufficient and inferior. Ironically, this challenging environment helped them come up with better survival strategies and a collaborative spirit with which to cope with unfavorable political and economical situations.
2. *Improvement in the economic environment.* From the 1970s on, in accord with developments in the Korean economy, the economic strength of the Korean saṅgha rapidly improved. Over time, even the nunneries were able to secure considerable economic power. In particular, the nuns efficiently applied their characteristically frugal and diligent attitude to establishing a secure livelihood for themselves, unlike their monk counterparts. This increased their inner self-confidence as female monastics. Due to the deepening of their practice and their activities in the greater society, and by extending the breadth of such activities, they also gradually enlarged the basis for the populace at large to trust them.

3. *Changes in ideals and the environment of their practice.* The modern Korean saṅgha has been governed by an ideology that put practice first—namely, Mahayana meditation as a direct path to enlightenment. As a result, there tended to be a strict division between the *ip'an* (meditators) and *sap'an* (support staff). The *sap'an* were viewed as mere supporters of the *ip'an*, performing the tasks necessary for the latter's subsistence. In this atmosphere, some *sap'an* came to feel shame at being monks who merely labored. Until the 1980s, the *ip'an* had absolute influence both inside and outside the saṅgha. For example, they had the authority to change the power structure of the entire order in a single morning at a monks' conference. Beginning in

the late 1980s, however, the *ip'an* recognized the importance of administering the order and began to actively participate in it. After that, the division between *ip'an* and *sap'an* gradually blurred, creating an environment in which the importance of the *sap'an* was sometimes greater than that of the *ip'an*. From then on, interest in various methods of practice besides *hwadu* meditation began to gain attention inside and outside the saṅgha. Practices that had been excluded as heretical—such as prayer and *yōmbul* (chanting/mindfulness of the name of a buddha), as well as austerities and altruistic service to others—began to rise in prominence. Such changes led to a recognition of the proper attitude toward practice and toward the strict regulations themselves. Again, in direct contrast with the corruption and power struggles of the monk-led order, the practices of the nuns were highlighted during this period of renewed emphasis on proper practice.

4. *Changes in the saṅgha following changes in Korean society.* Problems such as the role of religious groups, their altruistic activities, and their place in the greater society had been largely ignored due to the primacy given to meditation practice in the modern Korean saṅgha. Traditional monasteries located in the mountains had focused on ensuring their own economic base and were the main support for the formation of the modern saṅgha that gave primacy to the cultivation of meditation. However, as Korean society grew and changed quite drastically, the saṅgha became a large-scale organization and its role in the greater society also began to increase. Extending beyond the scope of the traditional monastery, new, modern-style monasteries appeared. They began to question the importance of the internal issues of transmission of the dharma and conversion of laypeople, and the external issues of the role of religion in the greater society.

5. *The rapid rise in the status and role of women in modern Korean society as a whole.* The extent of social participation and the position of women in Korean society have improved rapidly. Of course, there has been great resistance to this, and a huge differential exists between the

calls for a gender-equal society and the reality of that society. However, the Buddhist world, seeing itself as a participant in the movement struggling to revise those outlooks, is actively seeking to progressively influence such trends. A few years ago, there was a news report that a nun was appointed chief of the Bureau of Culture in the general administration of the Chogyae order, which was a clear sign that the order wants to at least appear conscious of this need for gender equality. This had been welcomed heartily by many people, not just inside the religion, and the enthusiastic welcome nationwide, in newspapers and other media, shows that Korean society was much more liberal, progressive, and flexible than the order had thought it to be.

6. *The change from a society of extended families to a society of nuclear families.* There has been a recent tendency in Korean society to replace the traditional concept of filial piety with an increased interest in child-rearing and education. In this tendency, there is more sympathy than before for the emotional and psychological conflicts between the family and the individual. Female clergy, who know from experience how to interpret the nuances of such problems, will naturally be able to understand and empathize with lay believers and disciples on such matters.

Within the contemporary religious landscape of Buddhism, nuns are equal and indispensable partners with monks, regardless of whether or not this fact is always acknowledged. In the past, monastic Buddhism was almost entirely a man's world, but, these days, radical changes have been taking place. Like monks, nuns receive full ordination (at present, only the Korean and Taiwanese institutions maintain the traditions of full ordination for nuns). Not only does the total number of nuns equal the number of monks, nuns are active participants in the tradition in various capacities: as avid mediators, compassionate caretakers for the needy, adept administrators of social welfare facilities, attentive and powerful leaders of city-based Buddhist centers, and ardent activists demanding democracy and opposing prejudice, within both the Chogyae order and the broader society. Korean nuns have built a viable monastic community that has survived near obliteration and established its own power of regeneration, as reflected in

its continual growth, its social activism, and its meditation programs, making the Korean nuns' saigha one of the most flourishing female monastic communities in the modern religious world.

Now that Korean nuns no longer have to focus exclusively on reestablishing their monasteries and places for practice and study, they have expanded the scope of their activities to include proselytization and social welfare work. These women also play a prominent role not only as practitioners but in the areas of education and the direct management of monasteries. They receive systematic training in lecture halls and meditation rooms, are aware of the history of their own tradition through lineage and teacher-disciple inheritance, and live a communal life in nunneries with other practitioners, in joint ownership of their own true character as a distinct movement within the larger Buddhist order. They assert this ownership by actively creating a constructive image of themselves through their engagement in everything from running children's summer schools and social welfare facilities to popularizing Buddhist songs for younger generations as both performers and disk jockeys. The culmination of these efforts lies in the formation of the bhikṣuṇī association. It started as a loose association of nuns called "Udambala hoe" (Udambara Association) in 1968, which became the formal National Bhikṣuṇī Association in 1985, with Hyech'un Sūnim as its first president. As an umbrella organization of Buddhist nuns, based on membership, it has been successful in various educational, intellectual, and social activities. With the successful hosting of the 8th Sakyadhita International Conference on Buddhist Women in Korea in 2004, the organization also proclaimed the vitality of the Buddhist nuns' tradition to the international Buddhist community as a whole.

NOTES

An earlier version of this chapter was published in the *Seoul Journal of Korean Studies* 22, no. 1 (June 2009), as "Reinventing Female Identity: A Brief History of Korean Buddhist Nuns."

1. This poem was composed in 1935. It is featured in Pon'gong Sūnim's biography in *Kkaedartim ūi kkoī* (Flowers of Enlightenment; Seoul: Yōrae, 1998) by Ha Ch'unsang, a volume that has contributed to the recent upsurge in interest in the lives of Korean nuns.
2. The locus classicus of the metaphor of north and south in the poem is the famous dialogue between Hongren and Huineng; upon his arrival at Hongren's monastery, Huineng was asked where he is from and what he is

looking for. Hearing that he is from the south, Hongren challenged Huineng by saying: "If you're from Ling-nan then you're a barbarian. How can you become a Buddha?" Huineng replied: "Although people from the south and people from the north differ, there is no north and south in Buddha nature." Translation from Philip Yampolsky, *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), 127.

3. Robert E. Buswell, Jr., *Tracing Back the Radiance: Chinul's Korean Way of Zen* (Honolulu: Kuroda Institute, University of Hawai'i Press, 1991), 5.

4. *Samguk sagi*, fascicle 4, in the third month of the fifth year of King Chinhŭng.

5. Robert E. Buswell, Jr., "Buddhism in Korea," in Joseph Mitsuo Kitagawa and Mark D. Cummings, eds., *Buddhism and Asian History* (New York: Macmillan, 1989), 152.

6. Nukariya Kaiten, *Chōsen zenkyōshi* (Tokyo: Shunjūsha, 1930), 30.

7. The three Japanese women traveled to Korea to receive full ordination and that event marks the beginning of Japanese Buddhist nuns. See Akira Hirakawa, translated by Karma Lekshe Tsomo, "The History of Buddhist Nuns in Japan," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 12 (1992): 49; Karma Lekshe Tsomo, ed., *Sakyadhita: Daughters of the Buddha* (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications, 1988), 128 and 131.

8. Kim Yŏngt'ae, *Paekche Pulgyo sasang yŏn'gu* (Study on the Buddhist Thought of Paekche) (Seoul: Tongguk taehakkyo ch'ulp'anbu, 1986), 75.

9. From early on, Paekche developed a strong tradition in the study of Vinaya (the Buddhist precepts and moral rules), as indicated by the record of the monk Kyōmik, who went to India in 526 to study Sanskrit and acquire Vinaya texts. He returned with an Indian monk specializing in the Vinaya in 531, after which he is known to have translated the *Vinaya pitaka* in 72 fascicles. Kyōmik's disciples composed commentaries, and the entire project was then dedicated to King Sōng, the ruler at that time. Based on these records, we can assume that the Paekche Buddhist order already had a well-established protocol for the ordination ceremony by 588. However, it has been argued that the record of Kyōmik's travels is suspect because it only appears in Yi Nŭnghwa's 1918 *Chosŏn pulgyo t'ongsa* (General History of Korean Buddhism). See Best, "Tales of Three Paekche Monks Who Traveled Afar in Search of the Law," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 51, no. 1 (1991): 139–197, esp. 152–178.

10. *Samguk sagi*, chukkwon-ji section.

11. For an in-depth analysis of the types of Buddhist women appearing in *Samguk yusa*, see Kim Young Mi, "Silla Pulgyo-sa e nat'a nan yŏsŏng ūi sinang saenghwal kwa sŭngnyŏ dŭl ūi yŏsŏng-kwan" (The Religious Life of Women and Monks' Understanding of Women in the History of Buddhism in Silla), *Yŏsŏng sinhak nonjip* (Feminist Theology Review), vol. 1 (Ewha Womans University, Yŏsŏng Sinhak Yŏn'guso, 1995).

12. The *Samguk yusa*, chapter 7, "Tales of Devotion."

13. Ibid.

14. The author of the *Samguk Yusa*, Iryŏn, notes that several different sources for the story existed: one was a contemporary account based on a local history (*hyangŏn*), while another was based on a monks' history (*sŭngjŏn*). As for the development of Pure Land tradition and the ten-thousand-day chanting community in the later period, see Eunsu Cho, "Re-thinking Late 19th Century Chosŏn Buddhist Society," *Acta Koreana* 6, no. 2 (July 2003): 87–109.

15. Edwin O. Reischauer, trans., *Ennin's Diary: The Record of a Pilgrimage to China in Search of the Law* (New York: Ronald Press, 1955), 131–161.

16. Ch'oe Pyŏng-hŏn, "Women of Royal Families and Buddhism in Koryŏ: Focusing on the Queen Mother Inye and the Establishment of the Ch'ont'ae Sect," presented at the HanMaum conference in 2004.

17. Cross-cultural comparative study might help us understand why women's names were better preserved in Zen (C. Chan; Kor. Sŏn) communities. On female teachers who appear in the history of the Chinese Chan school, see Miriam L. Levering, "Miao-tao and Her Teacher Ta-hui," in Gregory and Getz, eds., *Buddhism in the Sung* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999); and idem, "Women Chan Masters: The Teacher Miao-tung as Saint," in Arvind Sharma, ed., *Women Saints in World Religions* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000). Because so few primary source materials on Korean nuns have thus far been unearthed and introduced academically, these records about the elite nuns of Song dynasty China have significant bearing on our understanding of the faith and activities of Koryŏ Buddhism.

18. Heejeong Kang, "Women as Patrons of Buddhist Art in the Early Chosŏn Dynasty," paper presented at the 2002 Association for Asian Studies annual meeting in Washington D.C.

19. See Zhiru Ng and Sunkyung Kim, "Women and Kŭitgarbha Worship: Examples from Tang China and Chosŏn Korea," in proceedings for an international conference titled, "Korean Nuns within the Context of East Asian Buddhist Traditions," held in HanMaum Zen Center in Anyang Korea in May 20 to May 22, 2004, sponsored by the same foundation.

20. A survey by the Japanese government's domestic affairs division records that in May 1910 there were 958 Buddhist temples in Korea, with 5,198 monks and 563 nuns, according to the reports by *Hwangŏng Daily* (May 5, 1919) and *Taeŭan Maeil shibŏ* (May 6, 1919). See *Han'guk kŭnhyŏndae Pulgyosa yŏnp'yo* (Chronicles of Buddhist Affairs in Modern and Contemporary Korea), (Taeŭan Pulgyo Chogyŏ-jong kyoyuk-wŏn pulhak yŏn'guso [The Institute of Buddhism of Education Division of Korean Buddhist Chogyŏ Order], 2000), 21; requoted from Chŏn Horyŏn (Haeju Sŭnim), "Han'guk kŭnhyŏndae piguni ūi suhaeng e taehan koch'al" (Study on the Religious Practice of Korean Bhikṣunis in the Modern and Contemporary Period), *Han'guk sasang kwa munhwa* 33 (2006): 307.

21. Without historical materials to attest to their existence, we cannot say that there were doctrinal lecture facilities or meditators' communities for nuns during the Chosŏn dynasty, yet because there were meditation facilities and seminars for monks during this period, we cannot rule out the possibility

of such communities for nuns. The establishment of Kyŏnsŏng-am *sŏnwŏn* is well noted in various histories and the training and living there took an institutionalized form, so this facility can be considered the first modern *bhikṣuṇī sŏnwŏn*. How Buddhism was practiced during the Chosŏn dynasty needs further investigation.

22. Yunp'il-am meditation hall was the essential glue that held together many activities of *bhikṣuṇī* meditators in the 1930s. How this important meditation hall came to be established and who its leader was are not known. *Pangham-nok* records are available only from the year 1936, so we do not know who the resident meditators were before that. However, it is known that this facility was established in 1929 for monks, and was converted into a nuns' facility in 1931. We also know that Yongsŏng Sŏnim, another great Sŏn monk and revitalizer of Korean Buddhism in the modern period, resided there and supervised the meditators in the community in 1931, so we can make a circumstantial guess that he had played some role in drawing together the community of meditators, making the establishment of the facility possible.

23. Chŏn Horyŏn (Haeju Sŏnim), "Han'guk kŭnhyŏndae piguni ūi suhaeng e taehan koch'al," 308.

24. Hwang Ingyu, "Kŭndae piguni ūi tonghyang kwa Tŏksung ch'ongnim pigunidŭl" (Trends of Modern Korean Buddhist Nuns and the Tŏksung Forest Lineage), in *Kyŏnghŏ Man'gong ūi sŏnp'ung kwa pŏmmaek* (Kyŏnghŏ, Man'gong and Their Sŏn Buddhist Practice and Lineage), edited by Taehan Pulgyo Chogyŏ-jong kyoyuk-wŏn pulhak yŏn'guso (Chogyŏ Order Publications, 2009).

25. Wŏlchu Chimyŏng Sŏnim, *Talpit ūn uju rŭl pich'ŭne* (Moonlight Brightens the Cosmos), (Seoul: Pulch'ŏn, 1996), 144. This is a memoir of Pŏphŭi Sŏnim written by her disciple Wŏlchu Sŏnim.

26. See Eun-su Cho, "From Anonymity to Self-Reinvention: Korean Buddhist Nuns in the Twentieth Century," in Karma Lekshe Tsomo, ed., *Bridging Worlds: Buddhist Women's Voices across Generations* (Taipei: Yuan Chuan Press, 2004), 125–130.

27. From Martine Batchelor's interview of Sŏn'gyŏng Sŏnim, in her book *Women in Korean Zen: Lives and Practices* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2006), 98–99. This interview provides a rare personalized and vivid account of life as a nun in early twentieth-century Korea.

28. Chŏn Horyŏn (Haeju Sŏnim), "Han'guk kŭnhyŏndae piguni ūi suhaeng e taehan koch'al," note 9.

29. The information here on laywomen practitioners in the colonial period is based on Seung-mi Cho, "Kŭndae Han'guk Pulgyo ūi yŏsŏng suhaeng munhwa—Puin Sŏnhoe wa Puin Sŏnwŏn ūi chungsim ŭro" (On Women's Practice of Buddhism in Modern Korea—Focusing on the Women Sŏn Practitioners' Organization and the Women's Meditation Hall), *Han'guk sasang kwa munhwa* 34 (2006): 383–410.

30. Jin Y. Park's "Gendered Response to Modernity: Kim Iryeop and Buddhism" (*Korea Journal* 45, no. 1, 2005) approaches Kim Iryŏp from the perspective of modernity in colonial Korea.

31. For the role of the Buddhist runs on the purification movement by the Buddhist sangha, see Pori Park, "The Establishment of Buddhist Nunneries in Contemporary Korea."

32. Chŏn Horyŏn (Haeju Sŏnim), "Han'guk kŭnhyŏndae piguni ūi suhaeng e taehan koch'al," 310.

33. During the colonial period, Japanese Buddhist cultural practices (such as ceremonies, robe style, and, most important, allowing married sangha) had been imposed; to renew the Korean sangha, these influences had to be removed and Korean practice traditions reestablished.

34. *The DongA (Tonga) Daily* reported on August 14, 1955, that bhikṣuṇīs had been appointed as abbots at 623 temples in the nation. Quoted from Chŏn Horyŏn (Haeju Sŏnim), "Han'guk kŭnhyŏndae piguni ūi suhaeng e taehan koch'al," note 18.

35. Chŏn Horyŏn (Haeju Sŏnim), "Han'guk kŭnhyŏndae piguni ūi suhaeng e taehan koch'al," 312; the document also set criteria for selection for the central administrative body (*chonghoe*), without mentioning gender. However, the number of bhikṣuṇīs to be selected for the seats was agreed to be limited to one-sixth the number of bhikṣus.

36. Ibid.

37. According to *Sŏnwŏn ch'ongnim* (Comprehensive Review of Sŏn Meditational Centers), published by the Chogyŏ-jong headquarters in 2000, during the Buddhist year 2542 summer retreat, there were 32 *bhikṣu sŏnwŏn*, with 567 monks participating, and 32 *bhikṣuṇī sŏnwŏn*, with 716 nuns participating. As of 2008, the most recent survey record says there are a total of 5,413 monks and 5,331 nuns, according to the official statistics of the Chogyŏ order.

38. Ibid., 21–22.